For a Constellation that Doesn't Exist

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For a Constellation that Doesn't Exist

by bluesdandelion

Summary

Regulus Black awakens as Uchiha Sasuke on the night of the Massacre.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

so, i had this idea, and it wouldn't stop gnawing away at my brain, and well. this is the result, lmao. enjoy~❤

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Regulus Black blinked his eyes open, squinting against the onslaught of blurred, indistinguishable colours that bled together, like a watercolour painting.

He inhaled shakily *(he could breathe? how, why could he breathe—)*, only to choke on the heavy, suffocating, metallic tang of blood. He blinked, long and slow. Mind blank as he stared, uncomprehending, at the liquid, pooled mere inches from Regulus' face.

A layer of cold sweat clung to Regulus like a second skin, leaving him feeling weary, disorientated, too small and too large all at once.

He placed his *(too small to be his)* palms flat on the cold, hard ground *(but he'd been in a lake, drowning, dying—)* and pushed himself upright on trembling limbs, movements excruciatingly slow, encumbered by that sense that this was all very, terribly *wrong*—

Nope. He squeezed his eyes shut tight against the dizzying, non-sensical sight before him. Regulus remembered the cave, the potion, the horcrux, the Inferi, drowning, pain, and then nothing. His consciousness and sense of self fading, a dull haze embracing him as he *died*—

He swallowed jaggedly, throat scraped raw with dread. He clenched his jaw against a wave of nausea, and clambered clumsily onto trembling legs, knees and palms scraping against concrete.

The side-alley he'd awoken in was illuminated by the faint glow of the full moon, and the ominous pool of liquid he'd laid beside *(blood, it was blood—)* gleamed a brilliant blackness, like a puddle of tar.

He turned. Blinked. *Oh*. There was a body.

Regulus inched around the puddle, and closed the distance in two steps, peering down into unseeing, wide eyes forever frozen in terror. He stared and stared and *stared*—

He tore his gaze from the corpse, stumbled out of the side-alley onto a wide street, and—

Regulus stilled.

It was a macabre sight, something out of a nightmare, like the aftermath of a Death Eater raid. A street, littered with bodies, painted red with blood, chords of moonlight casting shadows across hollow, stiff faces.

His movements were awkward and stilted, as he struggled to adjust to his smaller *(far too short)* legs, stumbling over his own feet. Regulus teetered along, tripping over splayed limbs and slipping on blood, gut churning with a muted sense of terror.

His feet led him down the streets without conscious thought, the sound of Regulus' footsteps the sole sound cutting through the eerie silence.

His gaze lingered on the traditional Japanese architecture, on the red-and-white paper fans depicted on the walls, on the signs written in a language Regulus could not read, mind spinning with incomprehension.

(where was he? why was he still alive? why, whywhy, why—)

He came to a halt before a large, ornate building with high walls and a gated entrance, black tiled roofing with broad eaves, and perfectly curated shrubbery. It was extravagant, beautiful. Yet, it had Regulus' nerves screaming with alarm.

Pointedly ignoring the glaring, blaring warning signs, Regulus walked inside. It was a horrible mistake, he already knew, but there was a tug in his navel, an impossible-to-ignore foreign sense of urgency driving him onwards. It was silent, save for Regulus' too loud footsteps echoing down the dark hallway. He walked and walked, noting that all the shoji screen doors were shut, except for—

He stood in an open doorway, staring into a pair of eerie, glowing red eyes belonging to an impossibly pretty, young boy. No older than fifteen.

His gaze snagged on a flash of metal—a sword dripping crimson, and glanced down at the two corpses splayed at the boy's feet. He gripped the doorframe so hard his knuckles turned white. Ears ringing. Regulus could taste terror in his mouth, coating his tongue.

"Otouto." The boy's expression was icy and unforgiving. Like winter at its cruelest, frigid like the blistering wind. He stared and stared, unblinking, eyes blown wide, mind utterly blank—unable to understand the word spoken and very unwilling to let the boy, the *murderer* know.

The boy opened his mouth, again, to speak—still wearing that terrible look of cold indifference—but the words were lost to Regulus, as he internally reeled, trying and failing to comprehend that the one obviously responsible for the sea of corpses choking the streets outside was a *child.*

He stumbled backwards, every inch of his being screaming at him to run as Regulus abruptly, jarringly realised that he was alone with a mass murderer. So, he turned and fled, footsteps thundering as he pelted outside and down the bloodied streets, mind churning with fear and confusion—

He staggered as light exploded behind his eyes, a sharp lance of pain ricocheting through his skull, head pounding erratically as images *(memories)* rushed to the forefront, clear and sharp —of nii-san's piggy-back rides, of finally producing a successful *Katon; Gokakyu no Jutsu*, of nii-san teaching him to throw a kunai, of his kaa-san's soft voice reading him bedtime stories, of Shisui-nii's infectious smiles, of impatiently hovering by the front door; waiting for nii-san to come home—

A pained wail tore its way out of Regulus' throat. His reality fracturing, shattering, and reshaping itself as the memories of two lives—of eighteen year-old Regulus Black and seven year-old Uchiha Sasuke—assimilated.

Then, the boy—*Itachi*—was standing in Regulus' path, having dropped down from the rooftops with an inhuman grace.

Regulus stumbled, pitching forward, feet skidding on the concrete. He choked on the mess of emotions tangling up in his throat, breath coming out in sharp, shallow pants, trembling fingers curling into white-knuckled fists.

Harp strings of moonlight chased shadows across Itachi's flat, cold expression, giving it an eerie edge. His terrible red eyes burning with a searing intensity.

He could now recognise the corpses that Regulus had stumbled past, disregarded without care. Could put names to unseeing, bloodied faces from Sasuke's memories. But that's all they were. Memories. It was akin to watching a play, reading a novel, or one of those Muggle films—seeing it all from a third person perspective, with none of Sasuke's accompanying emotions. But still, he knew them, and now they were all dead.

He was a raw nerve, an exposed live wire, blindsided by the strength of the grief that clawed at his throat.

He took a shuddering gasp, flinching as he registered the wetness on his cheeks. He swiped at the tears with shaking hands, utterly mortified *(he hadn't cried in years—)*. He swallowed down the growing sobs that were locked up in his chest, stretching and straining his lungs, searing Regulus' throat—as though a knife had been dragged down the soft inside.

He choked on a warbled, incredulous gurgle. Regulus was pathetic. Truly. Mother had constantly mocked him for being too 'soft,' too emotional as a child. She'd tried so hard to purge it from him. It hadn't worked. Obviously.

He clawed at his cheeks, dug his fingers into the soft flesh, and dragged his nails down—*hard*. It was because this was a child's body, he knew, with a child's emotional sensitivity. It reminded him, unnecessarily *(as if Regulus could forget)*, that this body wasn't *his*. It was Sasuke's. And the knowledge that he had essentially stolen an innocent child's life made acid churn in Regulus' stomach—

He couldn't breathe, Regulus realised distantly, a wave of blank panic washing over him. He couldn't breathe. He couldn't—

His head was full of fog. He felt dizzy. His vision swum, black spots dancing on the edges. Then, abruptly, his sight cleared, coming back into focus with a vengeance that had him flinching backwards in surprise, the shock snapping Regulus out of his panic. His head whipped up, breath stuttering at the newfound clarity of his vision, at the sharpness and intensity with which Regulus now saw. It was as though the world had slowed down, as though everything was moving in slow motion.

Itachi's haunted, cursed gaze threatened to consume everything as their eyes locked, something indecipherable flitting through Itachi's blood-red eyes, there and gone, too quick to read.

I don't know you, he desperately wanted to tell him. Because he didn't. Not really. All of what Regulus knew of Itachi was based on memories, and as vivid and real as they may feel, they didn't belong to him. They were Sasuke's.

Itachi's face resembled a slate of stone, utterly still and cold, as he spoke, "I only acted like the brother you desired—"

There was static buzzing in-between Regulus' ears, the white noise muddling his already fractured mind, drowning out his surroundings. His heart stuttered with a mixture of terror and desperation. He still didn't understand what had happened, was still happening to him. Regulus was absolutely certain that he had *died*, dragged *downdowndown* to the depths of a lake by hoards of Inferi. So, what was all this? There were questions lodged in his throat, silenced by the fierce, uncompromising malice radiating from Itachi's crimson gaze.

"—My foolish little brother." *Not your brother,* he protested internally, half-heartedly. But, he was Sasuke now, wasn't he? So this Itachi—with hateful red eyes and a face carved of ice, was technically his brother. "If you wish to kill me, resent me, hate me—" Regulus' chest filled with cold despair "—run, run and desperately cling to life." The three-point pinwheel in Itachi's crimson pools begun to spin, shifting and transforming into three spiralling-curves. Regulus' breath hitched. *"Tsukuyomi."*

His body went limp, dropping to the floor like a puppet whose strings had been cut. The world begun to blur before Regulus as nausea slowly crept from his stomach to his head.

Then, everything went black.

"I only acted like the older brother you desired."

There was a clean, precise slice through the woman's *(kaa-san)* neck, another through man's *(tou-san),* their blood spraying across the tatami mats. He flinched, tears choking his throat, as their bodies hit the floor with a jarring thud, again and *again*—

"Run, run and desperately cling to life."

For a split-second he saw Sirius instead of Itachi, and terror spiked, cutting Regulus so deep that he could scarcely remember how to breathe. Sirius, too, had abandoned him, discarded

him like he was nothing, replaced him with laughable ease. But at least Sirius had spared him the villainous monologue before his departure. *That* and he hadn't killed everyone, either.

He blinked and Sirius was gone, his face fading back to that of Itachi's.

"Then one day, come before me with the same eyes that I possess."

The pool of crimson crawled closer, and if Regulus stretched his fingertips an inch further, he could touch it—feel Sasuke's *(his? were they his now, too?)* parent's blood on his hands. He swallowed down the bile that rose in his throat.

"There is no value in killing you now."

It was not just Sasuke's *(his)* parents, Itachi replayed the slaughter of the entire Uchiha Clan. He was reduced to nothing but an audience member, watching their murders again and again and *again*—unable to do anything but stare in silent despair as their bodies dropped, lifeless and bloodied, to the floor.

"To see what I was capable of."

He had seen copious amounts of blood during his stint as a Death Eater, but he had never seen so much at once. It seeped into the floorboards, splattered across clothes and pale faces, coated Itachi's sword, and stained his fingertips. On constant repeat.

"If you wish to kill me, resent me, hate me."

He wondered whether Sirius spared a thought for his dead little brother, or if Barty had mourned him. He doubted he would if he knew the truth—that Regulus was a traitor to the cause Barty had devoted his very life to.

Their friendship had dwindled in the face of something bigger, grander—a new world forged by blood, torture and murder. Regulus' awkward affection was *nothing* compared to the honeyed words that the Dark Lord had murmured in Barty's ears. The praise from his idol keeping him tethered, chained, loyal.

"My foolish little brother."

Chapter End Notes

so idk if it was clear, but reg got the sharingan in the midst of his panic attack, that's why his vision went all sharp and focused.

Chapter 2

Regulus awoke to the pervasive smell of antiseptics and the sound of steady, rhythmic beeping. He groaned softly.

Hospital, he noted dazedly, staring at the four, pristine white walls caging him. But why was he—*oh.* He inhaled sharply, breath stuttering in his lungs as he remembered. The glazed, unseeing eyes of bloodied corpses, eerie *redredred* eyes, and blood. So much *blood—*

A sharp sting shot down his right arm, wrenching Regulus from his spiralling panic. He yanked out the needle that was linked to a most peculiar Muggle contraption *(a saline drip)*, dropped it carelessly onto the floor, and sunk back down into the bed, his drowsy gaze coming to rest on the ceiling. There was a tangible silence in the room that settled down over everything like a thick, woollen blanket.

The Uchiha were all dead. Massacred. And Itachi. A mass murderer. Kinslayer.

(a soft curve of lips, dark eyes warm and loving, two fingers gently poking his forehead)

(an expression carved of ice, scorching crimson eyes, a voice thick with malice)

He swallowed, throat tight with unshed tears, and roughly rubbed his thin *(too small)*, pale fingers over tired, glassy eyes. His gaze drifted to his left arm. He slowly lifted it, half-expecting to see—

But, no. He tenderly stroked the smooth, pale unmarked skin of his forearm. The Dark Mark was indeed gone. But, he could not bring himself to feel relieved, not when it only further proved that this was not his body, that he was no longer Regulus Black—as if the jumbled, incoherent state of his mind, and the amalgamation of memories and informational input from two vastly different individuals wasn't proof enough.

The door slid open to reveal a nurse bent over a clipboard, a slight frown creasing her brow. Her gaze flicked up and she stopped mid-step, eyes going wide as she stared. Regulus blinked back sluggishly.

"U-Uchiha-kun," she stuttered, voice breathless with surprise. "You're awake." Regulus just stared, expression blank, entirely unsure how to emulate the emotions and speech patterns of a traumatised seven year-old. So, he remained silent, eyes fluttering shut, opting to ignore her presence.

He indulged himself in thinking of nothing, surrendering himself to the hazy cloud of exhaustion. He was tired down to the marrow of his bones, as if he had exhausted his body's capacity to feel any and all emotion. He could vaguely make out the sound of muffled voices, but they felt too far away, too distant to his ears, and he was slipping, drifting—

"Sasuke." *Ah.* Right. That was him now. His new name. He was somewhat aware that he should respond, but his tongue felt as though it had glued itself to the roof of his mouth, mind

smothered in fog. “I’m glad to see that you’re finally awake.”

Regulus—sensing that the owner of the voice wasn’t just going to leave, regardless of how much he wished it so—blinked his eyes open, flicking his cold, dead gaze up to the blurry face in his direct line of sight. He zeroed in on the old man bent over him. He observed him through heavy-lidded eyes, taking in the long, white robe and the peculiar hat—*oh.* He’d seen him once, at the Academy entrance ceremony. It was the Hokage, who was very clearly expecting some kind of response—whether it be verbal or non-verbal, but Regulus didn’t care for appeasing him.

“I’m sorry for your loss.” The Hokage smiled at him. A soft, kind smile that looked out of place on his pinched, haggard, exhausted face. “Whilst you were unconscious, your Clan grounds were cleaned out—”

His mind blanked in disbelief. *Cleaned out.* He swallowed against the bitter taste of acid in his mouth. The dismissive nature in which the Hokage spoke, as if the bloodied corpses of the Uchiha, of Sasuke’s *(his)* family were equivalent to a stain that had been removed, had raw, cold fury licking up Regulus’ spine.

He felt a sudden pressure on his *left* forearm, and a wave of panic surged over him, so intense that his ears buzzed. He jerked his arm out of the Hokage’s grip, disgust bubbling under Regulus’ skin. He may no longer be physically branded, but the phantom taint of the Dark Mark still lingered, still haunted Regulus. The Hokage’s eyes went wide, taken aback.

Regulus squeezed his eyes shut, praying that he would fall back into sweet oblivion, that this was a mistake, a dream. That Regulus Black had not stolen the body of Uchiha Sasuke, and that—for sweet, little Sasuke’s sake—Itachi *(his mind choked over the name, every syllable pained, dripping in betrayal, confusion, fear and pain)* hadn’t—

He turned over, curled up into a tight ball and tugged the blankets over his head, shutting the world out.

Upon his discharge, he was immediately directed to a place called T&I. Torture and Interrogation. He had to swallow down the bubble of hysterical laughter that rose in his throat—Konoha had sanctioned the interrogation of a seven year-old whose elder brother had just massacred his entire Clan.

It was fortunate, then, that it was Regulus experiencing the aftermath, and not the boy with bright eyes and rosy cheeks, who looked at his nii-san as if he hung the stars and moon in the sky.

He glanced down at himself in disdain, grimacing at the horrid abomination these people called clothes. He had always considered Muggle clothing to be offensive, but this was downright insulting. Especially the monstrosity that was the foot-wear.

It was a short walk to the T&I building, but it allowed Regulus his first real glimpse of the village. It was one thing to see it in a memory, but another entirely to look upon it with his

own eyes. He was well and truly in a reality vastly different from his own, one far before his time.

The sight of the villagers, their laughter trickling through the air, their carefree smiles, wholly unaffected by the tragedy that befell the Uchiha naught a week ago had his stomach churning, a wave of nausea rising in his throat. They didn't care. The Uchiha *(innocent children and women and entire families—)* were all dead, and no one cared—

But, what truly bothered Regulus, what crawled under his skin and itched like a scab that refused to heal, was the *staring.*

They tried to be discrete, but Regulus could see them glance in his direction, if only for a second, before sharply turning away, pretending as though they hadn't been looking at all. It grated on his already thin nerves, and Regulus barely resisted the urge to claw the eyes out of all those who *dared* to gaze at him as if his continued existence was a thing of pity. Of wonder.

The guards *(with strange animal masks like Itachi's)* led him through a maze of dark, damp passageways that Regulus tried and failed to make sense of.

The room they left Regulus in was empty save for a single metal chair and table. He took a seat, stone-faced, refusing to show any vulnerability. He had limited knowledge regarding the politics of this world, as they'd been irrelevant to little Sasuke. He was at an obvious disadvantage. He hated it. Regulus tried to convince himself that they wouldn't exploit a grieving, newly-orphaned child, but the fact that he was in T&I in the first place, didn't leave much room for optimism.

Then, he caught sight of his reflection in the glass. It wasn't new, this appearance. He knew what Sasuke looked like. But, having two sets of memories had Regulus experiencing a suffocating sense of body dysmorphia. He took a small comfort in knowing that his current appearance did not differ too drastically from his as Regulus. Sasuke was as pale as Regulus had been, with the same inky-black hair, but where Regulus' eyes had been the trademark Black-grey, Sasuke's were as dark and bottomless as the night sky.

He broke eye contact with his reflection, gaze roaming over the glass, idly wondering how many eyes were on the other side, staring back, analysing and assessing.

Then, the door creaked open, revealing a tall man with bandages wrapped around his right eye. The man didn't speak, offered no introduction or greetings, just simply moved to stand in the corner of the room, his single eye tracking Regulus' every twitch, every expression with an unnerving, unsettling intensity.

The second individual introduced himself as Morino Ibiki, and the last as a Yamanaka. Their Clan, he recalled from Sasuke's memories, specialised in mind-walking—this world's version of Legilimency. Regulus tried to maintain his composure, but he could feel panic pulsing under his skin like the startled wingbeat of a frightened bird. If his mind was intruded upon, then the Yamanaka would undoubtedly discover Regulus' foreign memories.

He immediately, instinctively reached for his Occlumency shields, only for his dread to increase tenfold when he realised that they *weren't there*—which, in hindsight, was stupidly obvious. This wasn't Regulus' body, it was Sasuke's. His fears proved to be unfounded, though, as the trio simply proceeded to ask him routine questions that Regulus had no real hope in answering.

(Why did he do it? Was there an accomplice? Why did he leave you, and only you, alive? Where did he go afterwards? What are his future plans?)

(He didn't know, hedidn'tknowhedidn'tknow, he didn't know—)

The Hokage led Regulus down the main market street.

He swallowed, hard. Uneasy at the sheer amount of attention on his person. The shinobi in the T&I building at least had the common decency to mask—albeit rather poorly, their curiosity. Here, the civilians stared unabashedly, completely unashamed in their blatant scrutiny. They stared with pitiful, yet awe-filled eyes, as if being purposefully, intentionally left alive was an incredible accomplishment—one worthy of praise, admiration.

The Hokage, seemingly unperturbed by the attention, continued to parade Regulus down the streets like he was showcasing a prize-winning show-pony. The market-goers stares were soon accompanied by whispers.

"Is that him?"

"The poor thing."

"I heard it was his own brother—"

"Oh, my. He's so young!"

Regulus clenched his jaw. Irritation gnawed at his veins, made his fingers twitch. The citizens continued to mutter and whisper as he passed, warning each other to keep their voices down, scolding others for their own lack of tact. He choked down the dizzying bout of rage that welled up in his chest.

Regulus hated this. Hated *all* of this.

He was overcome with relief when the Hokage finally led him off of the busy market streets, and towards the less populated areas. Sasuke had never taken note, but to Regulus, it was immediately apparent just how far removed the Uchiha compound was from the rest of the village. Were the Uchiha segregated? Or was their isolation a choice of their own making? He didn't know, nor did he particularly care. He was simply grateful to be away from prying eyes and disrespectful whispers.

The Hokage led him to the compound's Torii gate, informed him of the location of the Uchiha mass grave *(mass grave? the Uchiha burned their dead, not buried—)*, offered polite yet superficial reassurances, and then vanished in a swirl of leaves. Regulus blinked. Was that

a form of Apparition? If the old man knew how to apparate, then why did they *walk* here? And if the Hokage was truly insistent on walking, then he could have chosen a more secluded route. But he hadn't. He'd deliberately made a spectacle out of Regulus.

Frustration and anger swelled up in equal measures, a bolt of blackened hate tearing down his spine. He choked on his rage, swallowing it back down. It would not do to lose himself to mindless anger, not here, not in this tiny, useless body.

Regulus stared past the gateway and into the empty compound before him. Nearly a week had passed since that night, and yet, the faint metallic tang of blood still hung in the air. He exhaled shakily, forcing his feet to move as he, with much reluctance, stepped inside the place that would be his 'home' for the foreseeable future.

His gaze roamed over the sea of empty buildings as he walked, lingering on the faded red smears that stained the ground, splattered across the walls.

He soon found himself standing before Sasuke's *(now his)* house—the place where he'd stumbled upon blood pooled on the floor, an older brother with spinning red eyes, standing over Sasuke's *(his)* parent's corpses, sword dripping crimson—

His feet took him to the living room, and he paused in the doorway, eyes glued to the dark stains on the tatami mats. He cast his gaze around the desolate room, and let out a shuddering exhale.

This was Regulus' life now.

The following days passed in a blurry haze.

There was a heaviness that haunted him, curled in his chest, filled his lungs, shadowed each breath, and weighed down his limbs.

The urge to let go and fade into nothing was, on some days, so overwhelming that it itched at him, clawed its way so deep under his skin until it consumed his every thought. But this body did not belong to him, and therefore, this life was not Regulus' to take.

He found himself sitting, cross-legged on the floor of Itachi's room, gut twisting, stomach tying itself into knots.

Itachi had said that he'd slaughtered the Uchiha Clan to 'prove himself,' to 'test his strength.' But Regulus had his doubts. Itachi killed *everyone*, including defenceless civilians, children, the elderly, and his own parents—whose guard would've been lowered around their own son. It wouldn't test, nor prove *anything.*

He found himself fruitlessly searching, begging the still-lingering, ghost-imprints of Itachi's chakra for a reason, an explanation, if only for little Sasuke's sake.

Itachi was a once-in-a-generation prodigy in a world of child soldiers, forced to mould himself into the perfect weapon for the village to wield at a too-young an age, advancing the ranks of professional killers at a *ridiculous* rate. If the Uchiha Massacre was a result of Itachi's sanity snapping, Regulus wouldn't be surprised, nor blame him.

Still. He struggled to understand Itachi's actions. His delusional belief that murdering innocent non-combatants would truly prove his worth, test his abilities.

He knew it was futile to try and predict the thought process of the insane. It was akin to grasping at grains of sand, then watching, helpless, as they slipped between one's fingers. He'd seen it in Bella, who had broken early on. Her descent into insanity had been rapid, evolving into a razor-sharp madness weaponised by her natural inclination for cruelty.

He traced idle shapes on the tatami mats, staring at the too small, pale fingers of Uchiha Sasuke.

Regulus' tentative assumption was reliant upon Itachi's break, his dip into insanity, being real. Itachi's change—from a patient and doting elder brother, the courteous, well-mannered Clan Heir and pride of the Uchiha, and humble prodigy into *that*—was abrupt. Too drastic. Borderline unbelievable. But, then again, he'd seen it happen to Barty—who, like Itachi, had never been truly cruel nor bloodthirsty—but had broken and twisted himself into something unrecognisable, all to please the Dark Lord.

Still. It could've been an act—

(a cold, cruel crimson stare, remorseless and indifferent even after slitting his own parents' throats, easily and effortlessly torturing the otouto he'd claimed to love)

—which, admittedly, seemed unlikely, considering the evidence. So, perhaps Itachi had always been broken. Hiding his fractured, jagged edges behind a veneer of politeness and civility.

But, *still.*

Regulus' instincts were *screaming*, wailing in his ears that something was so incredibly, deeply wrong.

He was quick to realise just how similar Regulus Black and Uchiha Sasuke were.

They were both the second-born sons of prestigious families—the spare, only recognised as important once their elder brothers were no longer a viable option. The difference being that whilst Sirius had simply renounced their family and fled, Itachi had gone and murdered his.

Regulus and Sasuke both had brothers that were superior in every aspect, and even though they constantly strived to measure up, they never could. They ached for approval from their parents, for acknowledgement, for praise—even though it was pointless as their elder brothers had done it first, done it *better*.

Even when Regulus was made Heir, he could never live up to Sirius. He lacked the raw magic, the charisma, the temper and ruthlessness of a Black. He'd taken the Dark Mark to appease his mother, to fulfil his duty and role as Heir Black, but it wasn't enough. It never was, and Walburga had never hesitated to remind Regulus. He had his own talents, his own merits, but when Walburga and Orion looked at him, they only ever saw what he lacked in comparison to Sirius.

And yet, Sirius remained convinced that Regulus was the 'perfect son,' the ideal Heir. He had taunted him with that moniker, unaware of just how much Walburga had wished that Sirius had remained as the Heir. But, he could never bring himself to resent Sirius for it. He loved his brother far too much for that, even if that affection was never reciprocated.

Little Sasuke reminded him so much of Little Regulus it *hurt.*

Regulus collapsed on the damp grass, exhaustion dragging at his very soul, and stared up at the night sky. No matter where he was—Hogwarts, Grimmauld Place, or the Black Manor in France—the stars had never changed. Regulus only ever needed to simply turn his gaze upwards to see his one unchanging constant.

But here?

He had come outside, desperate to find his family in the sky, only to realise that the stars weren't the same. There was no Orion, no cousin Andromeda, no Sirius, no Aunt Cassiopeia, and no Regulus. His constellation didn't exist here. *Regulus* didn't exist here.

He curled his trembling hands into fists, chest tightening with each breath he took. It felt as though someone had plunged their hand through his ribs and dug their fingers into his heart, squeezing it so tight that Regulus was certain it would explode in his chest.

He curled up into a ball, tucking his shaking limbs close, grass tickling his cheek as he cried himself to sleep under the light of foreign stars, silent tears of despair streaming down his face.

Hunger was what broke him out of his misery, a sharp pang that dug and twisted his insides until he acquiesced, dragging his heavy limbs through the too-big, empty house.

He stared blankly at the array of foreign Muggle cooking contraptions before him, the knot in his throat tightening with the knowledge that he could not even make a basic meal for himself. It came with the realisation that he would eventually need to clean the house as well as his clothes, both of which he didn't know how to do without magic. Sasuke's memories were of no assistance, either.

It was utterly embarrassing to realise that he was an eighteen year-old who could not take care of himself without the assistance of a house elf. The Kreacher-sized ache in his chest throbbed painfully.

He rummaged through the cupboards, resigning himself to a diet of pre-packed foods for the foreseeable future. He could always venture out to the marketplace, he knew, but was not keen to once again subject himself to the villagers' scrutiny.

His brooding was interrupted by a sharp *knock* on the door.

Regulus stared, utterly dumbfounded by the Hokage's presence on Sasuke's doorstep. The old man cleared his throat, smiling down at him expectantly. Regulus didn't so much as blink.

The Hokage's smile turned strained, and he clasped his hands together behind his back. "It has come to my attention that you have yet to return to the Academy." *Ah.* Yes. The child-soldier factory. The place where they trained and indoctrinated young children by feeding them falsities about the glorified life of a shinobi.

Excuse Regulus for wanting no part in it.

"When do you plan on returning?" Regulus' expression shuttered. *When,* not *if.* The amount of choice he had was truly astounding, he thought with a truly unhealthy amount of bitter sarcasm, unsure as to whether he wanted to scream, or laugh, or cry.

He'd awoken in the hospital after multiple rounds of mental torture, only to be immediately hauled into T&I, then abandoned in a compound full of ghosts with no support. Yet, despite the lack of care and consideration for his well-being, Regulus was still expected to be loyal, to serve, to become a tool, a weapon for the village.

He doubted that the real Sasuke would question his path—becoming a shinobi was a given for the only survivor of a noble Clan.

How unfortunate for the Hokage that Regulus didn't care for shinobi traditions.

The Hokage leaned forward, brow creasing at his continued silence. "Sasuke," he said slowly, voice gaining an edge. A chill ran down Regulus' spine. "Do you not wish to become a shinobi?"

He bit down on the inside of his cheek to keep himself from snapping that *no*, Regulus had no interest in pursuing that particular career path. But since when did he ever have a choice in what he wanted in life? He hadn't as a Black, and wouldn't now as an Uchiha.

The Hokage sighed deeply, sounding heavily put upon. "I expect to see you back at the Academy on Monday."

Regulus wanted to scream.

He slowly lowered himself onto tatami matted floor, his racing heartbeat betraying his nerves. His eyes slipped shut as he reached within himself, desperately searching for that part of himself that was synonymous with his identity as Regulus Black.

He let out a giddy, relieved laugh when he brushed against it—fluid and slippery and wonderful—revelling in the feeling of home. His magic. It had followed him here, to this

new body.

There was another pathway alongside it, one that flowed far more sluggishly. *Chakra,* he realised with a jolt. It was an entirely foreign sensation and all the more easily identifiable for it. He tentatively reached for it, only to recoil at the feeling of burning, static electricity shooting alongside his veins.

He blinked his eyes open. So. He had magic. But no wand. It left him with one option. *Wandless magic.* He stared at a scroll on the opposite end of the room, and muttered, *"Wingardium Leviosa."* The scroll shakily rose a few centimetres off the ground before dropping back down.

Regulus exhaled sharply through his nose, jaw clenched, a grunt of frustration trapped behind his teeth. It would seem that his magical core had shrunk to fit his smaller body. It was unfortunate, but Regulus was patient. He could wait.

Regulus stood before the Academy building, unimpressed and underwhelmed. Admittedly, he had high standards what with Hogwarts being an *actual castle*, but even the Black family house, hidden away within Muggle London, had a larger layout than this.

His lip curled in disgust. Regulus had no tolerance for children and their antics. Besides, this was highly inappropriate—Regulus was an eighteen year-old attending a school alongside *seven* year-olds.

Regulus prayed that 'Sasuke's' abrupt change in personality would simply be attributed to trauma, and not because there was a dead wizard from another dimension possessing his body. He was fortunate, in a way, that Sasuke's parents were not alive. The change in personality would have been far too drastic to hide, and his pride forbade him from debasing himself by acting like the cheerful, innocent child that Sasuke had been.

In an attempt to go unnoticed, he entered the classroom as quietly as he could, body curling into itself to appear smaller. It was for naught, as, upon his entrance, the room fell dead silent.

Regulus, with his gaze trained on his feet and shoulders bunched up to his ears, moved to the back of the room. He could feel their attention on him, a prickling that started at his neck and travelled down to the base of his spine. He rolled his shoulders to shake off the sensation, and slowly lowered himself into an empty window seat, staring resolutely at his desk, horribly aware of all the eyes still trained on him.

It took a long moment, but eventually the loud chatter resumed, with only a few stray eyes darting back to Regulus. He was eternally grateful that small children had the attention span of a goldfish.

The Academy was mind-numbingly dull, Regulus concluded after a morning spent mindlessly filling out worksheets, twitching at all the subtle propaganda woven throughout the text. He was, however, pleased to note that he had retained Sasuke's knowledge of kanji, saving him from the embarrassment of being illiterate. He wasn't surprised that his sensei

didn't display any alarm at his drastic change. Uchiha typically possessed stoic dispositions, like Fugaku's cold demeanour and Itachi's unflappable personality.

When the announcement that they would be sparring came, Regulus, with true reluctance, made to head outside, only to be stopped by the sudden appearance of a blonde child squatting on his desk, crowing about *'beating the bastard.'*

Regulus could only stare, frozen and distressed by the proximity. He could not even make out the child's entire face with how close he was. A shudder raked itself down Regulus' spine, unease slithering under his skin. Everything in him seized up. The boy was still yelling, oblivious to Regulus' rapidly escalating panic.

His blood pounded in his ears. The blonde was too loud, too *close*—

The boy was yanked backwards by the collar of his horrid orange jumpsuit, and Regulus watched, numb, as their sensei reprimanded the boy on *'violating personal space.'* The boy didn't apologise—Regulus didn't expect him to, but the glare of utter contempt shot his way was quite the surprise. Sasuke's memories of the blonde were scarce—he hadn't interacted with, nor cared enough to even learn the boy's name, let alone having done something to warrant this level of animosity.

Regulus just shrugged it off. Children were fickle, temperamental creatures, and he needn't concern himself with their ever-changing mood swings.

As he trailed after his classmates, he became all the more aware of the Uchiha symbol that adorned his back. He choked down the bile rising in his throat. Regulus was a Black, and wearing the mark of another family felt like a betrayal. More than that, he missed being referred to by his own name. At this point, he would even take that horrid nickname his peers taunted him with—baby Black.

He was thankful, though, that the Uchiha favoured high-collars. Regulus loathed showing skin, which most likely stemmed from his new-found aversion to touch. It made him remember the thin, dead hands clawing at him, raking nails across his soft flesh, leaving deep, unforgiving red marks as he was pulled down into the depths of a lake—

He lined up alongside his classmates, watching round after round of sparring. He stared, a lump in his throat he couldn't swallow around, at the bruises and red marks blooming on too soft skin, the grim determination on faces still round with baby fat. His skin crawled. Did they even understand what they were training for?

Murder.

Child Regulus couldn't comprehend it. Teenage Regulus was terrified of it. Young Adult Regulus understood and appreciated the necessity and efficiency of it. But this? He'd always abhorred violence for the sake of violence. It was senseless, heedless, wasteful. It was why he had never able to advance the Death Eater ranks like Barty had.

He'd done everything they asked of him—helped set Muggle villages on fire, killed Muggles, hunted down Mudblood families, spread terror in the name of blood purity. And yet, it would

appear that he hadn't hidden his aversion to violence as well as he thought he had—his disgust, his reluctance to comply must have shown.

He stood in the sparring ring, opposite the blonde child from before, face schooled into an expression of disinterest to mask the nauseous writhing in his stomach. Taijutsu required hitting, kicking, punching, *touching*—all things Regulus despised.

The boy charged at him with a war cry, fists swinging. Regulus was an expert dueller, if he did say so himself—and spells flew back and forth at such a rapid speed that simply blinking could mean the end. The child's fist might as well have been moving in slow motion compared to a *Stupefy.*

The instincts ingrained in Sasuke's body through rigorous training demanded he take advantage of the boy's clumsy skill to get closer and hit back, but Regulus' mind screamed louder—telling his body to move away, to dodge, to not let the blonde touch him.

Their spar definitely lasted longer than the rest. It must have appeared as though Regulus was taunting the boy by constantly dodging, refusing to hit back. As if Regulus could ever be that cruel. In the end, he simply stuck out his leg, causing the boy to trip and land face-first in the dirt.

The glare the boy shot him was acidic, but Regulus just stared back blankly, unable to bring himself to care. He just wanted to go home—to Grimmauld Place, to Kreacher, to his family.

He hated it here.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

> hi~ it's 6:20am and I haven't slept yet lmao, so this chapter's completely unedited whoops

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Now listen, Naruto," their sensei folded his arms across his chest, tone thick with exasperation. Regulus stared in disdain at the blonde boy who'd been tied up and unceremoniously dumped on the classroom floor. "You failed the last graduation test, and the one before that. This is no time to be goofing off."

Regulus wholeheartedly disagreed. Let him fail, if only so Regulus would no longer have to deal with him. The blonde child had continued on with his pathetic one-sided rivalry with a vigour that was alarming. The boy had somehow misread his disinterest and taken his silence as a challenge. It was so utterly frustrating that Regulus wanted to scream.

He was an unpredictable ball of flailing limbs, loud noises, and endless energy, which, when they were forced to participate in spars, made him irritatingly difficult to dodge. Whenever the blonde landed a hit, it felt as though hives were breaking out across Regulus' skin from the contact. The only upside was that the child got so distracted by his small, momentary victory that Regulus was easily able to take advantage of the situation. The boy seemed to brawl based on instinct, rather than by analysing his opponent, which meant that Regulus never really lost.

The blonde was that he was so poorly socialised that he had no understanding of social cues or manners. His existence was suffocating and his personality was overbearing. He constantly screamed the worst possible things at the worst possible time at the top of his lungs, and failed to take note of everyone's averse reaction to it. No one could stand him. Regulus had even been tempted to break his silence just to tell the boy to *shut up.* Thankfully, it never came to that as his classmates seemed *very* willing to do it for him.

Their sensei turned to face the class, irritation carved into his features. "It's time for a *Henge no Jutsu* test!" The class burst into objections. It was the first time he'd ever been in agreement with these children. Sensei blatantly ignored them, raising his voice to shout, "You'll be transforming into me, okay?"

Regulus reluctantly dragged himself to his feet and formed a line alongside his classmates, jaw clenching as small bodies brushed against him, pointedly ignoring the loud chattering in his ear. He exhaled, long, weary and drawn-out. He would graduate, and by tomorrow, he would be done with the Academy—away from these children, away from the blonde boy, and away from the fangirls.

Regulus stared down at the *hitai-ate* in his hands, the bitter tang of bile creeping up his throat. It reminded him of the Dark Mark; a brand of ownership—only this was a mere swath of metal and fabric, and not a parasitic entity intertwined with his magical core. Yet, it felt just as damning.

He doubted his classmates had realised the full extent of what they'd signed up for. Regulus certainly hadn't when he'd taken the Dark Mark, and he'd died a mere two years later as a consequence of his ignorance. He wondered how many of these children, his classmates, would face the same fate.

He'd remained on the receiving end of *looks* from them throughout the years, but none had deigned to talk to him. It was most likely due to the stigma attached to his name, his association with a tragedy that his classmates knew was terrible, but could not truly comprehend. It did not help that Regulus remained mute, rendered incapable of forming words in front of others out of fear that someone would realise that he wasn't actually Sasuke.

It was mildly disconcerting that his classmates showed no alarm over the fact that hundreds of people within their village had been slaughtered in a single night by one of their own. Regulus hadn't blamed them then, and he didn't blame them now—they were still at the age where they truly thought that Konoha could do no wrong, where they blindly believed in the propaganda presented to them—still too young, lacking exposure to conflicting views, to question it.

It did not, however, explain the adults. There should have been other survivors. How come there were no Uchiha on a mission outside the village? How were there no Uchiha outside the compound—whether it be for late-night shopping, meeting with friends, in the hospital, or simply out at a restaurant?

There were sensors in Konoha, weren't there? So why did none of them notice the chakra spluttering out one-by-one in the Uchiha compound? The Uchiha ran the Military Police, did they not? So how come there were no Uchiha out patrolling the village? Why were all the Uchiha inside the compound, disregarding their duties to Konoha, and waiting to be slaughtered?

How was a thirteen year-old, albeit a prodigious one, able to slaughter an entire Clan filled with jounin and ANBU without raising a single alarm?

It positively *screamed* conspiracy.

And yet, *no one* had—to his knowledge—questioned the suspicious circumstances. Was their faith in, their loyalty to Konoha's leadership so absolute, so unshakable that they'd forgotten that Konoha was, first and foremost, a military dictatorship—and therefore *very* capable of horrific acts?

His classmates certainly had, Regulus mused, disgusted by their excitement at *officially* becoming child soldiers, blissfully unaware, or uncomprehending of the fact that they'd just signed their life, freedom, and autonomy away.

It was unnerving, the permanency of it all. It was a life-sentence; to be a shinobi meant to serve until death. If one wished to leave they would be marked as a traitor, labelled as a missing-nin, and be hunted down and killed. It was eerily similar to the Death Eaters—from the length of servitude to the punishment for deserters.

Regulus had wasted his life, first by following the whims of Walburga, then later a madman who branded him like cattle and treated him as sub-human. He was tired—so very, very tired—of being an unwilling pawn on someone else's chessboard. He'd spent his time as Regulus living like a slave, but he would not do so as Sasuke. He would buy his time, act as their perfect little soldier, then gain his freedom, one way or another.

He tapped his finger listlessly against the cool metal plate. He could tie it on his forehead—display the mark of ownership for all to see, or hang it around his neck. *Like a noose,* his mind hissed. Regulus scowled, reluctantly tying it around his left bicep.

Regulus twitched violently as a familiar ghastly-orange blocked his sight. He leaned back in his seat, dark eyes narrowing at the menace crouched on his desk. He eyed the *hitai-ate* on the blonde's forehead, bitter disappointment welling up inside him. The standards here must be horribly low. But, then again, the village would never turn away willing cannon fodder.

The blonde leaned in closer, completely disregarding Regulus' personal space, eyes narrowed into tiny, cerulean slits. Regulus stared back cooly. His lack of reaction seemed to irritate the boy, for his mouth twisted into an angry scowl.

"Naruto!" Regulus blinked, barely suppressing a startled flinch. The blonde violently jerked sideways in surprise at the infuriated screech, his overwhelming swirling mass of chakra flaring bright. "Leave Sasuke-kun alone!"

"B-But Sakura-chan!" The blonde whined, turning pleading eyes on the pink-haired nuisance, who blatantly ignored him, opting to stare at Regulus with heart eyes—because, apparently, 'fangirls' were a concept here.

There were those who had deemed his silent persona as 'cool' and 'mysterious,' and had taken a fancy to him as a result. He swallowed around the lump in his throat, stomach churning with nausea. Regulus was an *adult* and these were pre-pubescent girls. The entire situation was so utterly vile that it had bubbling bile filling his lungs, disgust coating his tongue.

He'd done *nothing* to encourage this behaviour; he'd refused to acknowledge their existence, been mute since the Massacre, and not once had he interacted with them in any shape or form. Regulus didn't understand, couldn't comprehend why they were infatuated with him. Was it his status as the Last Uchiha, or simply for his looks?

It was nauseating to see tiny children flutter their eyelashes at him, listen to them flirt clumsily, and watch them fight each other for his attention.

This will all be over soon, he reminded himself, desperately trying to keep the cracks in his sanity from widening.

“Team 7. Haruno Sakura, Uzumaki Naruto, Uchiha Sasuke.”

Regulus felt his soul leave his body as his pink-haired fangirl shot to her feet, cheering and jeering in his blonde-haired fangirl’s face. *Oh, no.* He slumped down in his seat, burrowing his face in his high-neck collar, wishing that he could just sink through the floor and disappear.

“Iruka-sensei!” *Oh, no.* “Why does an outstanding shinobi like me, have to be on the same team as that prick over there?” Regulus wanted to ask the exact same question. Who had he pissed off to deserve *this?*

“Sasuke’s grades were the best of all twenty-seven graduates and yours were dead last,” the blood vessel on their sensei's forehead throbbed. “You understand that we have to do this to balance the teams, right?”

Oh, Regulus certainly understood, he just didn’t agree—and judging by the murderous look on the blonde’s face, he was of the same opinion. The blonde redirected his glare to Regulus, who stared back blankly, which only seemed to incense him further. The blonde opened his mouth to retort, only for their sensei to interrupt.

“Okay!” He clapped his hands together with such faux cheerfulness that Regulus’ eyebrow twitched. “This afternoon we’ll introduce your jounin senseis. Until then, take a break.” Regulus shot to his feet immediately, all but fleeing the classroom, studiously ignoring the pitiful calls of *‘Sasuke-kun!’* that trailed after him.

He wanted words wth the complete and utter idiot that had distributed the teams. Regulus had, in fact, found a handful of his classmates tolerable; the lazy genius, the bug-boy, and the girl with eyes creepier than the Dark Lord’s. And yet, he had ended up with *them*. It was a nightmare made reality.

Hysteria bubbled up in his throat. Regulus was *not* cut out for teamwork.

Konoha-nin were groomed to form bonds that would tether them to the village, to trust their teammates, to put their lives in a stranger’s hand. They were stupid to think that he would adhere to their rules. He was a Slytherin at his core; self-preservation was ingrained into his very bones. He had sworn life-long allegiance to the Dark Lord, had forever bound his magical core to Him via the Dark Mark, and yet, Regulus had died trying to kill Him.

He would always save himself first—his family and Kreacher had been the sole exception, but both were gone; Regulus was beholden to nothing now.

Regulus, upon returning to the classroom after spending the break hiding from his peers, stared in dismay at the seating arrangements.

“Sasuke-kun!” The pink-haired girl—*Haruno*—waved him over, enthusiastically gesturing to the seat beside her. Regulus felt his left eye twitch. He had no choice, not when *all* his

classmates were now seated beside their new teammates. He dejectedly slumped in his seat, staring vacantly at the wall.

He listened with one ear as their sensei called out team after team, until only Team 7 remained.

“Iruka-sensei!” The blonde—*Uzumaki*—whined. “What’s taking so long?”

Sensei cleared his throat, nervously shuffling the papers in his hands, shoulders stiff and tense.

“He has a tendency to be, er, late.” Late, Regulus thought viciously, was a polite way of putting it. They’d been sat here for nearly an hour. “He’ll be here soon, okay? So don’t leave or cause trouble. I’m talking about you, Naruto!” He gave the clock on the wall one last anxious glance, then bid them a hasty farewell, leaving the three of them alone in the classroom. Regulus felt a line of heat press against his side almost immediately. *Oh no.*

“So, Sasuke-kun…” *Ah.* No, thank you. He was not dealing with inappropriate, clumsy, nauseating flirting today. He stood up so abruptly that she flinched backwards, and headed to his usual seat in the back row. He stared out the window, valiantly attempting to ignore his very unfortunate reality.

His sole reprieve was knowing he’d no longer have to attend the Academy. In the past five years, the only interesting lesson had been the brief one covering explosive seals.

Naturally, they weren’t trusted to use real sealing paper, so Regulus was forced to make do with the child-proof substitute. Instead of an explosion, the practice tags released sparks and smoke so that if they did it wrong, they wouldn’t accidentally blow their hands off. Regulus was instantly enamoured by the concept of fuuinjutsu. He was even tempted to break his silence just to inquire after it.

But he’d opted to visit the public library instead, only to be severely disappointed by the lack of resources—‘a dying art,’ the texts had called it. It was by far the most interesting skill he’d encountered thus far, and yet, it was essentially a dead practice. It reminded him of Ancient Runes—his best subject, in how symbols, kanji, and technique formulae were combined to create something entirely new.

Honestly, it was so typically unfortunate that the sole subject to hold his interest was a dying, obscure practice that Regulus didn’t know whether to laugh, scream, or cry.

Three hours soon passed without any sign of their sensei and Regulus’ temper was beginning to fray. This was extremely unprofessional. It wasn’t enough that he’d been paired with immature, loud and volatile #1 and #2, but he also had an incompetent sensei.

Why did he bother with this village again? Oh, right. Because he had no choice.

His head snapped up at the sound of the door opening, disappointed but not surprised to find that it was only Uzumaki, poking his head out.

“Naruto!” Haruno reprimanded from where she sat atop a desk, swinging her legs back and forth. “Just sit down.”

“Why is our sensei so damn late?” Uzumaki scowled, stealing yet another pointless glance down the hallway. Regulus sighed, long and drawn-out. Uzumaki’s constant complaints were grating on his already too-thin nerves.

“What are you doing, Naruto?” Haruno shrieked, and by Salazar, her voice was shrill. He’d never encountered a woman as loud as her. Any pure-blood worth their blood would have never made such an unsightly sound—well, all except Bella—but she was always an exception. He hadn’t associated with Mudbloods, so his knowledge on how commoners were raised was greatly lacking.

He blinked sluggishly, straightening up to stare at Uzumaki as he balanced precariously on a stool, placing an eraser on top of the door. Regulus blew out a frustrated breath. How childish. Late though their sensei may be, and whilst Regulus could definitely appreciate retribution, this was just immature.

“That’s what you get for being late,” Uzumaki crowed, looking far too self-satisfied. Regulus huffed out a mirthless laugh. Their sensei was a jounin, there was no way they would—

Regulus stared despairingly as the eraser collided with a mop of silver, a puff of chalk dust billowing out in a small cloud. Regulus blinked slowly, disbelieving and deeply unimpressed. Their sensei was slouched against the doorframe, his one visible eye heavy-lidded yet sharp as he stared at them, his chakra coiled tight.

“Maa, how can I say this?” He drawled. “My first impression is… I don’t like you guys.”

The feeling was mutual.

“Uchiha Sasuke.” The name felt strange, foreign on his tongue. It was the first time he’d spoken it out loud, acknowledged it as his new name. His stomach roiled. But he wasn’t Sasuke. He was Regulus Black. Wasn’t he? “I like star-gazing.” Uzumaki and Haruno stared at him with such intense, all-consuming interest, it was like they’d never heard his voice before. *Oh.* Wait. He truly hadn’t spoken in public since the Uchiha Massacre five years prior, had he?

“I dislike most of everything else. I have few hobbies. As for dreams—” Regulus pursed his lips. He wanted nothing from this world—except, perhaps, to uncover what kind of conspiracy he’d been dumped in the middle of. The Uchiha Massacre reeked of clandestine machinations. “I have none.”

Regulus awoke with a start, a scream tearing itself from his throat.

His limbs were twisted in cotton sheets, and his shirt, drenched in sweat, clung to him like a second skin, throat tight. He felt suffocated, as though he were still underwater, where he had

been swallowed by a world that was cold and dark, where the icy water had closed in around him; stealing away his air, trapping him—

He took another shuddering breath, mind replaying the way he'd clawed through the water, limbs flailing desperately as he struggled towards the surface. His air supply had run out, and he'd instinctively opened his mouth for air, only to swallow a gush of icy, filthy water. It had flushed back up to his nostrils, streaming down his throat and nose—

His hands clawing blindly at his throat, just like the Inferi had when they'd dragged him *downdowndown—*

He snapped back to himself, sight clearing—*oh.* He could see. Regulus' room was dark, and yet, he could see. Regulus felt hysterical laughter bubble in his chest. He'd activated it again, then. He stumbled to his feet, making his way to the bathroom, and flicked on the lights.

Redredred eyes, edged with mania and spinning with a single tomoe, looked back at him.

He stared and stared and *stared—*

Regulus, with his hair grown out to his shoulders, tied back in a short, loose ponytail, bangs framing his face and blood-red eyes, looked eerily like Itachi.

He swallowed, throat tight, and blinked the Sharingan off, eyes fading to black.

There were so few written recounts of the Sharingan, because of how secretive the Uchiha were, so it was passed down by word of mouth. It was ironic how the only person that Regulus could now hear it from was responsible for making it that way in the first place.

He recalled Itachi's words, of how the Sharingan was unlocked in stages by experiencing severe emotional trauma, of how to gain the Mangekyou *(come before me with the same eyes that I possess—).* Did Itachi truly want his little brother to experience the trauma of witnessing the death of someone he loved? Well, unfortunately for Itachi, Regulus had no one he loved in this world. His 'brother' would not get what he wanted.

He squeezed his eyes shut—unable to look at his reflection any longer. Regulus choked back a wet laugh, his bottom lip quivering. He didn't want these eyes; his kin-slaying brother's eyes, the blood-coloured eyes that belonged on the face of the Dark Lord.

Regulus, once again, wished that he'd died in that cave.

Regulus sat, leaning back against a tree trunk—Itachi's old, black backpack beside him, admiring the sunrise.

The sun washed the clearing with a golden glow, the foliage turning molten under the amber rays of light. In the distance, he spied the intimidating Forest of Death, silhouetted against the sky, with the shadows of birds swooping above the tree-line.

Regulus pulled Itachi's old, over-sized jacket tighter against him as to avoid the sharp chill of the pre-dawn air. If anyone was to recognise the original owner, then his sanity would

undoubtedly be called under question. But for Regulus, it was less about sentimentality and a deteriorating mental state, and more a matter of convenience. Itachi's clothes were big and bulky, which meant that no one could touch him if they could not figure out where the lines of his body started underneath all the fabric.

It was early, barely six o'clock, and he was, unsurprisingly, the first to arrive—the importance of punctuality having been drilled into him since birth. He was certain that their sensei—*Hatake*—had never received such a lesson.

"Sasuke-kun!" Haruno waved enthusiastically, hurrying towards him. He stared at Haruno's long hair and red qipao dress. It was terribly impractical. It set his nerves on edge. Regulus could easily envision all the different ways her attire alone could get her killed. He looked away, swallowing thickly.

Uzumaki arrived shortly after, radiating an eagerness and thrumming with an energy that Regulus could never hope to understand, let alone replicate. He greeted Haruno, who, as per usual, ignored him in favour of chattering at Regulus, who, in turn, gave her the cold-shoulder.

The sun rose, steadily climbing in the sky, and their jounin instructor still didn't appear. Last night, he'd looked up 'Hatake Kakashi' in an old, outdated Kiri bingo book he'd looted from Fugaku's study. 'S-rank. Jounin. Speculated ANBU. Friend-Killer Kakashi. Copy Ninja. Kakashi of the Sharingan.' It was a fearsome reputation, and so far, he'd failed to live up to it.

He was jerked out of his musings by a flare of Hatake's distinct ozone chakra, accompanied by two identical screeches of, "You're late!"

Their jounin sensei stood languidly before them, holding an alarm clock and two bells, his one visible eye crinkled into an eye-smile. Regulus' gaze was instinctively drawn to his concealed eye, which, according to Kiri's bingo book, held the Sharingan.

"Hmm?" Hatake tilted his head, looking bored. "I distinctly remember saying that the meeting time was ten."

"You liar!" Uzumaki hissed, flushing red with anger. Sensei waved him off, unperturbed and deeply amused. He proceeded to cheerfully introduce them to the test rules and set the alarm for noon. They had two hours to retrieve one of the two bells, or fail.

"W-Wait! You said that this was survival training," Haruno pointed an accusing finger at Hatake—which, *fair.*

"It is." The git sounded smug. "Survival against me. You won't succeed unless you come at me with the intent to kill." Regulus lamented that he couldn't cast a wandless *Avada Kedavra.*

"Hah!" Uzumaki snorted derisively. "You're so slow you can't even dodge a black-board eraser. We'll definitely beat you." Regulus squeezed his eyes shut tight in dismay, embarrassed on Uzumaki's behalf.

There were insults exchanged, and then Uzumaki idiotically, recklessly charged at Hatake, face carved with belligerent anger. Regulus blinked, and then Hatake had twisted Uzumaki's arm, one hand pressed atop his spiky-blonde hair, the other pointing Uzumaki's own kunai at the vulnerable back of his neck.

Regulus ignored Haruno's startled shriek and silently appraised the jounin. He was fast, as expected. The slouching, the lazy drawl, the relaxed, bored attitude—in fact, his entire demeanour was a misdirection.

"Begin!"

Regulus immediately took off into the woods, moving fast and weaving amongst the trees. He ran up the side of a trunk and settled on a high, thick branch. He exhaled, reaching inwards, double-checking that his chakra, a thrum of static electricity that ran beneath his skin, was still coiled tightly, hiding his signature.

Then, he heard shouts in the distance.

Regulus sighed, exasperated and resigned. Uzumaki was brash, over-confident, bull-headed, and heedless of danger. A true Gryffindor. He swallowed against the acid flash of bitterness in his mouth.

Regulus worried at his bottom lip with his teeth. Two would pass, one would fail. It was a nonsensical statement. Konoha's dependence on teamwork—on cohesive three-man cells—was nauseatingly extreme, borderline fanatical. The nature of the test itself contradicted everything Konoha stood for. Unless, Hatake had intentionally set them against each other, set them up to fail—

Oh. He huffed out a humourless laugh. It was rigged. Of course it was.

Regulus pursed his lips. Would the other two grasp the test's true purpose? Uzumaki—no. But Haruno graduated as the Top Kunoichi, she possessed the intelligence and analytical skills to figure it out. Right?

He sighed heavily. It hardly mattered. Regulus had no desire to be a shinobi.

But would Uchiha Sasuke, the Last Uchiha, even be allowed to fail? He doubted it. He'd been specifically assigned to Hatake. The only other Sharingan wielder in Konoha. The only individual capable of training Regulus to truly harness its power.

Then, Hatake dropped out of the sky.

He crouched on Regulus' branch, an orange book in hand, bells perched on his hip. Hatake eye-smiled. *"Demonic Illusion: Hell Viewing Technique."*

For all Regulus' practice in creating genjutsu with the scrolls hidden in Fugaku's study, he'd never been trapped within one before—unless Itachi's overpowered Mangekyou induced *Tsukuyomi* qualified. He knew, theoretically, how to release it—and if he weren't so paranoid, he'd activate his Sharingan and immediately dispel it.

It was so obviously a genjutsu, because this did not exist in Konoha. Yet, at the sight of an all too familiar cave, he found himself frozen, cold fear tearing at his mind, reaching in with sharp, icy fingers.

He stood, petrified, on a narrow rim of rock that surrounded a great lake, so vast that Regulus couldn't see the distant banks. The surface of the lake was like smooth, black, stained glass—still and mirror-like. The greenish, phosphorescent glow of the Drink of Despair broke the otherwise dense, velvet darkness, faintly illuminating the cavern.

The lake's glassy surface rippled as a very large and pale hand erupted out of the dark water, the sound echoing like an explosion in the oppressive, unnerving silence. A spasm of terror gripped him, throat closing over in fear, a scream trapped behind his teeth.

The marble white, slimy hand clamped around his ankle, grip unforgiving and icy-cold. The Inferi yanked at his leg, knocking Regulus off balance. He slipped, tumbling backwards and crashing onto the ground, pain jolting up his spine at the jarring impact. Its head emerged from the water—face sunken, eyes flat and frosted over. He choked back a cry of horror, fingers clawing desperately at the smooth, slippery bank, struggling and failing to find purchase.

It's a genjutsu, it's a genjutsu, it's a *genjutsu*—

Regulus let go, freeing his hands, allowing himself to be dragged towards the dark water as trembling fingers formed—*"Kai!"*

He collapsed, flopping gracelessly back on the branch, blinking blearily at the hazy canopy above, the forest slowly swimming back into focus. He concentrated on taking long, deep breaths, on getting air into his lungs—in and out, inhale and exhale.

His sensor abilities were not accessible if he actively suppressed his chakra, and seeing as Hatake was now aware of his location, it remained pointless to continue to do so. He uncoiled his tightly wound chakra, information flooding his senses.

It was disconcertingly easy, he'd discovered, to manipulate the chakra thrumming through his body, and it had taken Regulus *very* little time to adapt to actively using chakra for basic uses, like enhancing and strengthening his muscles. It functioned so differently from magic, flowing inside him like an alien entity, that he could not help but be aware of it all the time; it ran alongside his veins like an electric wire, sparking and flickering each time he utilised it.

It only served as yet another reminder of the life he stole. This chakra did not belong to him, it was Sasuke's.

He'd read a basic medical book on chakra conditions and had discovered that he had severe chakra sensitivity. A side-effect of his hypersensitivity and uncanny awareness was that he could literally *feel* the chakra around him. A natural sensor, he believed it was called. It was as disadvantageous as it was advantageous. It made it near impossible for anyone to sneak up on him, but it was also incredibly overwhelming; he was constantly flooded by the excess of information that chakra signatures provided. Chakra was just so *loud.*

It was why he kept his chakra coiled tight, close to his skin when he was within Konoha, lest he go insane from the flood of overlapping chakra signatures.

Regulus let out a small, strangled noise of frustration, dragging his hands through his hair, anger clawing its way up his throat, writhing under his skin. He was irritated—at his own incompetence and at Hatake's use of that genjutsu. If he'd been the original Sasuke, then he would have seen the night of the Massacre.

He felt his lip curl. Hatake had used it on a traumatised child. How *cruel.*

He locked in on Hatake's chakra signature. Paused. He could leave it alone. But—

He crept through the thick foliage, sliding behind a tree as the clearing came into view. He peered around the edge of the trunk and spotted Hatake perched atop the memorial stone like a deformed gargoyle.

He flexed his fingers, and muttered, *"Accio."* The bells immediately flew across the clearing and into his hand, Hatake none the wiser. He let out a small, viciously pleased noise. But it wouldn't take long for Hatake to notice the bells were missing, so Regulus broke into a run, chakra coiling tight—signature hidden, nimbly weaving through the trees.

Then, the alarm went off.

He slowly made his way back to the clearing—bells hidden in Itachi's jacket pocket, only to find Uzumaki tied up to a wooden post, Haruno sitting at his feet, looking dejected. Hatake waved him over with a cheerful eye-smile. Regulus blinked, bewildered. Had he not noticed yet?

Hatake clapped his hands together. "Well, there's no need for you guys to go back to the Academy."

Uzumaki grinned, as bright as sunshine after rain. "Then, all three of us—"

"Yep. All three of you," he drawled, looking each of them in the eye. "Should quit as shinobi."

Well. There would be no complaints from Regulus. "Can I leave, then?"

Hatake blinked, long and slow. Uzumaki spluttered in shock. *"Teme!"* He screeched, thrashing in his bonds. "Take this seriously!" Regulus shot him a withering glare. Uzumaki blatantly ignored him, turning his scowl on Hatake. "And *you!* What does that mean? Why do we have to quit?"

"Because all of you are just punks who don't deserve to be shinobi."

Regulus nodded his vehement agreement. Uzumaki's face twisted. "You traitor," he hissed venomously.

"Don't call Sasuke-kun that!" Haruno snapped, waving her fist threateningly at Uzumaki who wilted, shrinking into himself.

“But Sakura-chan!” He protested, pouting. “Sasuke-teme agreed—”

Oh, for the love of everything green and silver—

Regulus withdrew the bells from his pocket and dangled them in the air, a soft chiming sound filling the clearing. The talking ceased as they fell dead silent. Haruno gaped. Uzumaki spluttered a string of expletives. Hatake stared, hand immediately going to his waist, blinking when he realised that yes, Regulus had indeed stolen the bells. Regulus glared at him, a muted gleam of vindictive satisfaction nestled in his chest.

“Well,” he sounded dumbfounded. “Sasuke passed! Naruto, Sakura, it looks like you two will be heading back to the Academy.”

“Actually,” Regulus drawled, cutting through their cries of outrage. He tossed a bell to Haruno, who fumbled as she caught it, green eyes wide. He stepped forward, balancing the remaining bell on Uzumaki’s spiky blonde hair. *“They* pass.” It was an empty gesture, seeing as it had been a test of teamwork, which they had failed—abysmally, but to the others, it would appear as though he were sacrificing himself for them.

Regulus was a Black and a Slytherin. He wasn't above manipulating people into believing that he was a better person than he actually was. It also re-emphasised his complete and utter disinterest in being a shinobi.

“B-But Sasuke-kun!” Haruno protested, trying to return the bell. He waved her off. She huffed, frustrated. “I won’t accept this! It isn’t fair to Sasuke-kun, he’s the one who stole them. If anyone should pass, it should be him.”

He shuddered at Haruno's sincerity. Regulus was surrounded by self-sacrificing, honourable Gryffindors. The horror.

Uzumaki scowled angrily. “Yeah, it was teme that stole them, so he’s the one that should pass.” Regulus blanched. They were both so disgustingly noble.

“How about this, hm? I’ll allow two of you to pass, so pick amongst yourselves, okay?” Regulus stared, deeply irritated. Hatake was toying with them.

Haruno hesitated for a long moment, then, “No.”

Uzumaki nodded vigorously. Regulus worried for his neck. “It’s either all of us, or none of us!” Uzumaki shot a pointed look at him, daring Regulus to object.

He sighed. “What they said.” It didn’t matter, anyways. ‘Team 7’ had already faile—

“You all pass!”

His brain screeched to a halt. They what now? He blinked, staring at Hatake, aghast. Hatake simply eye-smiled at him, condescending and smug. Regulus bristled. “The real answer to this test was teamwork.” The gleam in Hatake’s eye was knowing as he stared down at him. Regulus twitched.

Haruno exploded. “What do you mean by teamwork? There are only two bells.” Ah. He’d overestimated her. She hadn’t figured it out. “Even if we worked together, one of us would still fail.”

“Maa, why don’t you ask Sasuke? He certainly figured it out.”

Regulus hated Hatake.

“Huh?”

Ugh. Regulus scowled. “Have you ever seen a two-man genin team?”

“No, but…” Haruno paused, realisation dawning in her eyes. “Oh.”

“Oh,” he mimicked snidely, lips curled into a sneer. He didn’t understand how that constituted as a pass—

Regulus paused. Blinked. *Ah.* So, that’s how it was.

Haruno turned to Hatake. “But… I still don’t understand,” she frowned.

“The aim was to see if you could forget about your own interests, and you did,” he said pointedly, then glanced at Regulus, tone turning sly. “What was it again? ‘All of us, or none of us?’”

He was being mocked. He *hated* being mocked. “Are we done?” Regulus snapped, temper fraying, eye twitching in irritation. He didn’t wait for a reply, stalking across the clearing to collect his backpack.

“You know—” Regulus let out a string of curses as Hatake spawned beside him like some kind of demented jack-in-the-box. “I recall Itachi having that exact backpack—” a weighted, heavy pause “—*and* jacket.”

“That’s because they *are* his,” he snarled, ignoring the unreadable look sent his way, angrily stomping off.

Chapter End Notes

regulus, my baby, is an unreliable narrator, and his opinions on characters doesn't coincide my own~!

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

D-Ranks were the bane of Regulus' existence.

If he thought that adapting to cooking and cleaning daily was hell—so much so that *Scourgify* was the first wandless spell, outside of *Accio*, that he'd taught himself—then D-Ranks were a whole new level of torture.

As if weeding a garden, painting a fence, locating lost items, and delivering packages like a glorified errand boy weren't demeaning enough—they had to *babysit*. Regulus' disdain for children was so blatant that Uzumaki took to acting as living, breathing barricade, preventing him from getting too close, lest he snap and kill one.

He also witnessed firsthand just how poorly Uzumaki was treated by the villagers—the suspicious side-eyes, the glares of hatred, mutters of 'demon' and 'monster,' the refusal to get within three metres of him. It left him reeling. Uzumaki was brash, loud, immature, stupid, and irritating, but a *demon?* The child, he could begrudgingly admit, had a heart of pure gold.

Regulus had no need for the meagre pay from their D-Ranks. The Uchiha coffers were full. So, he always shoved his paychecks into a spluttering Uzumaki's flailing hands, with the hope that he'd purchase a new jumpsuit—one that wasn't a ghastly orange. But Uzumaki never did, and Regulus resigned himself to co-existing with such an eyesore.

Hatake arrived late every single day. Without fail. So, naturally, Regulus did the same. He also neglected to teach them anything. Hatake harped on the importance of teamwork, yet did nothing to help foster it. He was more like a vaguely concerned bystander who just happened to hover nearby than a jounin sensei, opting to spend his time with his nose buried in that orange book of his instead.

Hatake was also impossible to read. It rankled him that, as a Slytherin, he could not discern Hatake's true motives. His words twisted between faux friendliness and sarcastic bullying, constantly deflecting every attempt to actually learn—even an E-Rank ninjutsu or a simple taijutsu sequence.

He often wondered why Hatake even bothered showing up at all.

"What's the distance to the target?"

"Five metres. I'm ready anytime."

"So am I!"

Regulus shut his eyes, exhausted and utterly done. He bit back the urge to rip the ear-piece out, toss it on the ground and stomp on it, break it into a thousand tiny pieces—

"Sasuke-kun?"

"Teme! You still there? You better not have bailed on us, you basta—"

"I'm here," he snapped, regretting every choice he'd made that had led him to this moment. He could scarcely believe he'd lowered himself so. Hatake had forced him into partaking—promising laps around the village if he opted out—in a wild goose chase across the village in a search of one fat, ugly cat.

Uzumaki had cackled, long and loud, when Regulus had tripped and fallen in a pathetic attempt to corner the beast. The little furry gremlin had the gall to look smug at the sight of Regulus' mortified, flushed face. It had raked its claws down Regulus' arm—so eerily reminiscent of the Inferi that he'd violently flinched, a whimper trapped between his teeth. Hatake had noticed and stared, unblinkingly and assessing in that unnerving way of his.

The demon was just lucky he couldn't cast any Dark Magic wandlessly, or else it would be a lump of flayed, dead fur.

"Go!"

Regulus, petulant and uncooperative as he was, didn't move. Uzumaki and Haruno charged out from behind their trees with a war cry, which was quickly followed by a loud, triumphant, "Got'cha!"

"No! No! *No!"* Uzumaki cried, outraged, arms crossed to form an 'X,' shaking his head furiously. "I want to do, uh, ya know, a more incredible mission! We keep getting the crappiest possible duties. Find us a better one!"

Regulus despaired. Haruno and Hatake wore similarly resigned looks.

"You idiot!" Regulus jerked, startled, at the outburst from their old, Academy sensei. "You're just a rookie! Everyone starts off with these simple duties and works their way up." As much as Regulus loathed the D-Ranks, he had to agree. Team 7 had graduated a mere month and a half ago, and yet they still held the exact same skillset as an Academy student due to Hatake's refusal to train them. They weren't ready. Uzumaki least of all.

Mid-way through the Hokage's long-winded, lengthy and utterly dull monologue on responsibilities and the benefits of D-Ranks, Uzumaki slid to the floor, sitting cross-legged. Regulus stared, numb, at the blatant disregard. He held no respect for the Hokage, only contempt and suspicion, but propriety demanded deference towards those in a high ranking position.

"Geez," Uzumaki pouted. "All you do is give lectures like that. But you know what? I'm not the trouble-making brat you still think I am!" Regulus' eye twitched. That was a blatant lie.

Haruno, too, looked terribly skeptical, but kept silent. Much to Regulus' disgust, their Academy sensei looked pleased.

Then, the Hokage's lips curled into a smirk, and—*oh.* Regulus went dead still. He looked like a cat that had just caught the canary. "Okay."

Uzumaki spluttered, double-taking dramatically. *"Huh?"*

"If you want it that much," he said leisurely, that irritating smirk still on his lips, "I'll give you a C-Rank mission. It's a protection mission of a certain individual."

Hatake looked as though he'd been slapped. Violently and repeatedly. Regulus would bet the entire Black fortune that he was deeply regretting neglecting to teach them anything.

"Who? Who?" Uzumaki prodded, a wide, genuine grin breaking out across his face. "A Feudal Lord? A Princess?"

The Hokage's weathered face was unreadable. "Calm down, I'm about to introduce him." His gaze shifted to the door, voice raising. "You can come in!"

Regulus blinked, his 'suspicious as shit' radar blaring. The Hokage conveniently had a C-Rank mission on-hand as soon as Uzumaki requested it? With the client waiting just outside his office? He squinted, narrowing obsidian eyes at the Hokage. Yeah, how about *no.*

The door creaked open and Regulus recoiled violently at the stench. He bit his lower lip, nose wrinkling. The client squinted, leaning his weight against the doorway. His eyes were lightly glazed, unfocused, cheeks dusted pink. The old man took a large swig of alcohol, pudgy fingers gripping the bottle tightly.

Regulus had a Bad Feeling about this.

Regulus, despite his many misgivings, was eager to get the hell out of Konoha.

He spent the evening scouring the empty compound for articles of clothing that did not possess the Uchiha Clan symbol. Regulus' appearance was distinctive enough—he didn't want to paint a literal target on his back in the form of an *uchiwa.*

He was the first of his teammates to arrive at the village gate the next morning. Itachi's backpack was crammed with one-too-many storage scrolls, Regulus' paranoia at being unprepared having reared its head. This was new, an unknown. He'd only ever slept in a bed. Never outside, amongst the dirt and bugs and—

He ignored the impatient, disgruntled bridge-builder at his side, and gazed out beyond the gate at the never-ending expanse of green, insides twisting into an anxious coil. He exhaled, chest shuddering with the force of it.

Regulus had read textbooks pertaining to life outside the walls, and the idea that the world beyond Konoha was better was what held his sanity together. But what if it was *worse?*

“Sasuke-kun!” He turned to see Haruno hurrying towards him, a bright smile on her face. She stopped beside him, and as per usual, he tuned out her mindless chatter, gaze fixed on the horizon.

It took another ten minutes for a flailing, red-faced and out-of-breath Uzumaki to arrive, spluttering a pile of excuses for his lateness. Haruno scowled at him, cuffing him roughly on the back of his head. Regulus sighed when childish squabbling broke out, glancing at the bridge-builder who was staring at them despondently.

Regulus arched a brow. He had entered his request as a C-Rank, what had he expected? If the man wanted chuunin or jounin, then he should have paid for a higher ranking mission.

Hatake then arrived in a swirl of leaves. Regulus blinked, startled. He was relatively on-time—as in, only ten minutes late instead of four hours. It was enough of a shock to snap the pair out of their argument. Uzumaki gaped comically.

He eye-smiled, giving a lazy, two-finger salute. “Yo.” Regulus just knew that the squirrelly git was revelling in their gobsmacked expressions.

His quarrel with Haruno forgotten, Uzumaki bounced on the balls of his feet, practically dancing with happiness. “Let’s go!” He made a mad dash out the gate. “I’ve never left the village before. This is so cool, dattebayo!” Regulus huffed a laugh, amused by his enthusiasm, following him out of Konoha.

“—But, don’t worry. There won’t be any shinobi combat in a C-Rank mission,” Hatake flapped a placating hand.

Famous last words, Regulus thought miserably, eyeing the forest with trepidation.

“Then, we won’t come into contact with any foreign shinobi?” The relief in Haruno’s voice was palpable.

“Of course not,” Hatake patted her on the head. Haruno’s face relaxed into a sheepish smile, the tension bleeding out of her shoulders. How foolishly naive. It wasn’t as though Uzumaki’s monstrous chakra signature was going to ping on the radar of every shinobi within a five-kilometre radius or anything, Regulus thought sarcastically—feeling more than a little hysterical.

He hummed low in his throat, speaking of chakra signatures… He focused on his senses. Blinked. What was—? Oh. Two foreign signatures. Close. He scanned the path ahead. Huh. The signatures originated from a bloody puddle.

Was this a hallucination? The Black Madness? Some new shinobi bullshit?

Wait. Was Hatake aware? He side-eyed his joke of a sensei. Hatake was a S-Rank shinobi—he definitely knew. So why tell Haruno such a blatant lie? Hatake’s single visible eye snapped to his. Regulus frowned, flicking his gaze to the puddle and back. Hatake eye-smiled. Regulus wanted to kill him.

He stiffened, nerves all tense and coiled, like a spring, tightly wound, as they passed the puddle. The hairs on the back of his neck raised in warning, then—

Hatake was rendered immobile, bound securely by chains.

Haruno let out a startled shriek and Uzumaki floundered, screeching. Regulus just stared at Hatake's trapped form flatly, highly unimpressed.

"One down," foreign shinobi #1 declared smugly. The pair of shinobi pulled, the chains tightening ruthlessly, and bye-bye Hatake.

There were shrill cries of "Kakashi-sensei!" to his right as Hatake was shredded, flayed into tiny bloody pieces. Regulus squeezed his eyes shut as warm liquid splashed across his face. He screwed up his nose in disgust, swiping his hand across his face, wiping the gore from his eyelids.

Regulus slowly blinked his dark eyes open, staring blearily at Hatake's remains on his fingers. *Rest in peace, sensei*, he thought dully, *you won't be missed.*

Then, he felt a flicker of familiar, distinctive lightning chakra to his right. Regulus registered two thoughts simultaneously; oh, he's still alive, and of course the git was opting out of the fight. Salazar-forbid he ever did anything remotely useful. Well. If Hatake wanted to traumatise twelve year-olds and then leave them at the mercy of foreign, adult shinobi, then he could deal with the repercussions if one of them ended up dead.

"Two down!" Regulus glanced over to where the foreign shinobi had appeared behind Uzumaki, who stood dead still, face pale and petrified. He wasn't at all surprised that Uzumaki would be the next to die. The chains wrapped around him, binding him as they did Hatake, only he doubted that Uzumaki had the ability to perform a *Kawarimi* under such high pressure and escape. The chains tightened and Uzumaki let out a pained shriek, face scrunched up in agony.

It was amusing that, despite Regulus' aversion to bloodshed, it was easy and instinctive to stand by and allow violence, allow death to occur. He'd done it—albeit poorly; cowering and flinching—when Walburga and Sirius had clashed. Then later, he watched on with blank, unfeeling eyes as the Death Eaters tortured and maimed. To avert your eyes, to object, to interfere was a weakness—and weaknesses got you killed. So, in order to survive, he adapted accordingly, and Regulus had always been a quick study.

He blinked, and then Hatake was there, a tall blur moving to incapacitate the foreign shinobi. The chains loosened and Uzumaki collapsed onto the ground, panting on all fours, breath ragged and rabbit-quick.

"Kakashi-sensei," Haruno whispered shakily, face white with shock. "You're alive."

Hatake had the gall to look apologetic, as though he hadn't just abandoned them and left them to fend for themselves against far more experienced opponents. "Naruto, sorry for not helping you right away. I got you hurt. But, I didn't think you wouldn't be able to move."

Regulus felt white-hot rage slide down his spine. And even if Uzumaki could move? What would he have even done? Hatake hadn't taught them anything—not even the basics of attacking or defending. What did he expect them to do against trained, adult shinobi?

"Sasuke." Hatake's tone was unreadable, but Regulus could see the disapproval in his one visible eye. He gritted his teeth, mouth tight with bottled annoyance. Had he expected Regulus to interfere, to risk his own life to save someone he didn't even like? Did Hatake forget that he was also just a genin—a highly untrained and combat-averse one at that? Was it because Sasuke was an Uchiha? Was Hatake projecting his preconceptions of the Uchiha Clan onto Regulus?

He revealed white teeth in a predatory smile, eyes flattening, turning as cold as frigid icy wind. "They aren't my responsibility." *They're yours,* went unspoken, but he knew Hatake heard it from how the corner of his eye tightened.

The most awful, tragic part of this whole affair was that Haruno and Uzumaki seemed to be genuinely shocked that they'd very nearly died. It made a sickening amount of sense. The sugar-coated Academy propaganda romanticised out-of-the-village missions. If every pre-genin knew that it was a possible death sentence—that the risk of dying on a C-Rank was impossibly high, then there wouldn't be any genin.

Hatake worked quickly, tying the two foreign shinobi to a large tree trunk, then stepped back, levelling Tazuna with a cold stare.

"Tazuna-san," Hatake's tone was uncharacteristically serious. "We need to talk." *Finally.* Regulus had been highly suspicious since the Hokage assigned Team 7 this bloody mission.

"These guys are chuunin from Kiri," he gestured to their *hitai-ates.* Regulus clenched his jaw, fury licking up his spine. Hatake knew that, and still had expected three weak, inexperienced genin to hold their own against them?

"Why did you let the brats fight if you knew that?" Yes. Exactly. Thank you, Tazuna.

Hatake's subsequent explanation brought forth roiling, conflicting emotions. His plan, Regulus could begrudgingly admit, had merit. If only it didn't depend on Team 7's non-existent competence in combat.

"Maa, it didn't work out quite the way I wanted, since I had to interfere sooner than I expected," he said sheepishly, as though he wasn't at fault for his own plan failing. If they'd been trained, then perhaps Team 7 may have succeeded in holding them off long enough for the Kiri-nin to reveal their true target. "But, they were after you, weren't they?" Tazuna's resulting silence was telling. "If it was known that shinobi were after you, then this mission would have been a B-Rank."

Ah. So it was a matter of monetary issues. Regulus couldn't relate. But Uzumaki evidently could. So, when all was said and done, Uzumaki's bleeding heart demanded that they continue. Regulus vehemently disagreed. Hatake had labelled this mission as a B-Rank. They were not equipped to handle it. Yet, he didn't dare voice his opinion, knowing it would be disregarded in the face of Uzumaki's overbearing, sunshine optimism.

He stared, wide-eyed and unblinking, at the rickety old boat—the literal death trap, bobbing on the water.

Absolutely not.

“Sasuke?” Regulus’ gaze flicked upwards, meeting Hatake’s single expectant eye. His jaw clenched, incisor’s grinding. The boat resembled the one he’d crossed that lake in. Where he, you know, *died.*

He stared out at the vast expanse of deep blue, stomach roiling. He had the assurance of being able to walk on water, but it didn’t lessen the turbulent emotions twisting in his chest. But like with the majority of things in his life, he didn’t have a choice. So he swallowed down his fear and tentatively stepped onto the boat, inhaling sharply, confidence wavering at the small, jerky rocking motions the boat made.

He quickly sat down, breathing in the sharp, cloying scent of sea salt, and focused on regulating his emotions, on remaining calm. He blinked, unimpressed when the aforementioned bridge came into view. He’d seen far bigger, *better.*

“I need to talk to you,” Tazuna averted his gaze shamefully, fingers twitching restlessly at his sides. “You’re right about this job being outside of your duties. There’s a super dangerous man after my life. You’ve probably heard of him before…”

Hatake blinked. “Who?”

Tazuna’s face twisted, expression turning deeply unnerved. His voice was a hushed whisper when he muttered, “Gatou.” It was a name Regulus was unfamiliar with, but Hatake clearly recognised it, if the split-second of blatant shock on his face was anything to go by. The following explanation caused dread, thick and heavy, to settle in his bones. Because *of course* their botched mission involved an economically influential, absurdly wealthy businessman who had illegal side-dealings.

Regulus was, unsurprisingly, the first off the boat. He sighed in relief as his feet touched solid ground, the churning nausea in his stomach subsiding.

The silence that settled over their procession was heavy and tense, weighted with the fear of the unknown. Then, Uzumaki darted forward, weapon in hand, shouting, “There!” And flung a shuriken into the bushes. Regulus flinched, on-edge, half expecting a shinobi to charge out of the bushes, screaming bloody murder. But there was nothing—no movement, no rustling. Nothing. It was eerie. Uzumaki may be an idiot, but he had brilliant intuition.

There was a short pause, then—

“Hey, midget!” Tazuna shouted angrily as Uzumaki tried and failed to play off his embarrassment. “Stop acting like a moron!” Regulus’ eye twitched at the volume. If Tazuna was expecting trouble, then he should stop shouting and drawing attention to them.

“Somebody is after us, I swear,” Uzumaki mumbled. Regulus reluctantly agreed, nerves standing on end, a sense of chilling unease trickling down his spine. He stared at the tree-line, holding himself perfectly still. He unwound his chakra—which he always kept tightly coiled—casting his senses out, and—*fuck.*

He flung himself onto the ground, elbows and knees protesting at the sudden impact, as a massive sword swung through the air where his head had been only moments before. He was distantly aware of Hatake shouting, but his attention was focused on the new chakra signature. It was *ginormous.*

He lifted his head off the ground, peering over his shoulder and up at the imposing figure perched on the gigantic sword imbedded high in the tree trunk. Panic slithered tight up his throat.

Regulus registered two thoughts simultaneously; the cow-hide arm and leg warmers were absolutely hideous, and *oh*, we’re all going to die.

He dropped his head, forehead resting on the dirt, and closed his eyes, suppressing the urge to giggle. They were so screwed. Hatake’s chakra was barely half of Cow-Hide’s. Regulus knew that Hatake was highly skilled, but if it came to a battle of endurance? It wasn’t a promising outcome. Besides, Hatake had four people to protect—four liabilities, four potential hostages.

There was a sharp, brief flicker of icy chakra to his left, before it disappeared, expertly masked. He lifted his head, staring unblinkingly at the forest. Was that his imagination? Or—

“Teme,” Uzumaki hissed, tugging at Itachi’s jacket sleeve. “Get up!”

“Well, well,” Hatake drawled. It was a poor attempt at nonchalance, his shoulders were far too tense. “If it isn’t Kirigakure’s missing-nin Momochi Zabuza.”

Regulus just sighed. A missing-nin. From the ‘Bloody Mist’ no less. *Of course.*

Chapter End Notes

look, I love Kakashi - he's one of my favourites, but pre-shippuden Kakashi was a fucking terrible sensei lol

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

I'm going to apologise in advance for the terrible fight scene. I literally have no fucking clue how to write them and it shows lol

"Sorry, but the old man is mine," Momochi stared imperiously down at them from his perch.

"Please, take him," he muttered under his breath, "he's all yours." He was totally on-board with handing Tazuna over if it meant they could leave unscathed.

There was a *thwack* as a hand slapped his shoulder, followed by a sharp, warning, *"Teme."* He huffed indignantly. They were all suicidal. Bloody Gryffindors.

"Surround and protect Tazuna-san," Hatake instructed, voice low and sharp, one hand on his *hitai-ate*. "Do not enter the fight. Teamwork is vital here." Regulus rolled his eyes. 'Teamwork this, teamwork that.' Honestly, what was it with Konoha and their ridiculous, irrational emphasis on teamwork?

Then, Hatake lifted his *hitai-ate.*

"Ah. I get to see the famous Sharingan. I'm honoured," he grinned viciously, staring at Hatake, speaking as though Regulus—a real, living, breathing *Uchiha*—wasn't right there.

"Sharingan?!" Uzumaki crowed, far too loudly. "What the hell is that?" Regulus stared at him in stunned disbelief. Just how deep did Uzumaki's ignorance run? Then, much to his shock and horror, Haruno abruptly launched into an exasperated lecture on the Sharingan, as though there wasn't a murderous missing-nin *right there.* Why was Momochi even entertaining this? Why wasn't he attacking?

"—When I was a member of Kirigakure's assassin team—" Oh. Fantastic "—I had a handbook. It included information on *you*."

"I didn't realise I had a fan," Hatake remarked blithely. "I'm flattered." *Ugh.*

Momochi's face twisted into a sneer. "Enough talking. I have an old man to kill." Uzumaki and Haruno moved, standing protectively in front of Tazuna. Regulus' eyes darted to the tree-line. Running seemed very appealing right now. "But it seems I will have to kill you first, Kakashi."

Regulus blinked and Momochi vanished from his line of sight.

Fear knotted in his throat. He was so unbelievably quick. Momochi's chakra signature pinged to his right and Regulus turned to see the missing-nin standing atop the water, hands rapidly forming signs, tendrils of blue swirling at his feet. He could feel the immense build-up of Momochi's chakra, like the charge in the air before a raging storm. Regulus exhaled slowly, trying to breathe back the gnawing tension that was ratcheting its way up his spine.

"Suiton: Kirigakure no Jutsu."

He blinked, and Momochi was gone again, thick mist seeping into the air.

Regulus inhaled sharply, focusing, and—*there.* Momochi's massive storm-like signature flickered wildly several metres ahead, his form a blurred, hulking shadow, partially obscured by the growing mist.

"Momochi Zabuza, when he was a member of Kirigakure, was well-known as an expert in silent killing." Well. That was reassuring. Thank you, Hatake. "You don't even notice until you're already dead." *Shut up.*

The chakra content in the air continued to grow, the mist thickening along with it. He could barely see a metre in front of him now.

"Eight choices." Regulus stilled. The voice came from everywhere and nowhere all at once. *"Liver, lungs, spine, clavicle vein, neck vein, brain, kidneys, heart."* What was this? A bloody anatomy lesson? *"Which one should I go after?"*

He very nearly snorted. For an 'expert in silent killing,' the man was awfully chatty.

Then, the area flooded with killing intent. Regulus froze, cold seeping in through his lungs, breath lodging in his throat. It was bone-chilling, paralysing—but not so much so that he could not move; the horrific, brutal circumstances of his death invoked a bone-crushing terror that the killing intent could never equal, let alone surpass.

There was a shift, a displacement in the air directly behind him, and his senses *screamed* as Momochi's signature flared inches from his back. Dread oozed up the ridges of his spine.

"It's over," Momochi hissed, and Regulus moved. The hand-signs for *Shunshin* came easily, and he reappeared several metres away, deeper into the mist, where he could no longer see his teammates. Half a split-second later, the distinct *clink* of metal-on-metal reverberated through the still air. Uzumaki and Haruno cried out—not in pain, but in shock. Hatake must have placed himself between them.

"Sensei behind you!" Uzumaki cried. Hatake's and Momochi's signature's flared brightly just as Haruno's horrified shriek sliced through the air. He glanced longingly in the direction he knew the trees were located. Regulus could run, but—

"Don't move." That was Hatake. "It's over." He squinted through the mist. Regulus didn't trust Hatake as far as he could throw him—and that wasn't very far at all. Uzumaki let out a series of delighted noises, but Regulus' limbs remained coiled, tense.

The clearing filled with manic laughter. "'It's over?' You don't get it," Momochi drawled. "There is no way you can defeat me with your monkey-like imitations." He giggled, the sound echoing eerily. "But that was impressive of you!" Regulus disagreed; he certainly wasn't impressed. Hatake had a formidable reputation, one he kept failing to live up to.

Then, much to Regulus' dismay, Momochi begun to describe Hatake's techniques out-loud and in detail. In the middle of a bloody battle. As if Regulus actually cared. But why? Just—*why?* Why do all these shinobi, who are known for their secretive nature, broadcast their techniques and monologue in the middle of a fight? What was next? Momochi's tragic backstory?

The sound of fighting finally resumed, and he slowly crept backwards, edging further away from the fight. There was a loud splash of water, and—

"Fool," Momochi's smug voice reached his ears. So Hatake had been beaten. Big surprise. Regulus kept shifting backwards until he hit something solid. His stomach twisted into a violent, sickening knot, heart in his throat. He tentatively reached back, and—*oh.* He exhaled. It was just a tree.

His head snapped up as an additional chakra signature pinged on his radar. It was identical to Momochi's, yet fainter, like an echo. A clone. Fuck. Regulus *hated* clones. Just the mere thought of a wizarding-equivalent of this technique, where the Dark Lord could create multiples of himself, made Regulus want to dissolve into hysteric, manic tears.

He could vaguely register Momochi monologuing, and then Haruno's distraught cry cut through the silence, "Naruto!"

"Take Tazuna-san and run!" Hatake called. Regulus blinked. "You have no chance of beating him!" No kidding. "As long as he's keeping me trapped in this prison, I can't move." Ah. Trapped? He'd definitely given Hatake too much credit. "The water clone cannot go very far from his real body. Run!"

If Regulus could actually fucking figure out which way was out, then he'd gladly comply. The looming forest at his back was not a viable option—not with how his instincts *screamed*, vehemently warning him against entering, and distantly, he recalled that quick flicker of icy chakra—

Uzumaki's distinct war cry abruptly rung out and manic laughter gurgled up Regulus' throat—both amazed that Uzumaki was still alive and dismayed at his lack of self-preservation. He listened to the faint sounds of battle, heartbeat pounding in his ears. The mist was beginning to grate on his already thin nerves.

"Sasuke! Where are you?" Uzumaki's alarmed voice echoed.

Regulus blinked and a second Momochi clone suddenly appeared before him, grin wide and eerie, that gargantuan sword swinging towards his head. A scream was trapped between Regulus' teeth as he ducked. There was a *crunch* as the sword imbedded itself in the tree, mere inches above Regulus' head. His hands formed a seal, and he body flickered away.

A second later, the clone appeared before him again, face rippling with glee. Regulus' head felt like a kettle, hysterically whistling, way past its boiling point. Fuckfuck*fuck*—

He moved, flickering away again, half a split-second before the sword would have split his torso in two.

"Coward," was spat at him. Yes, yes, he was a coward, but he was an *alive* coward, so—

He cautiously, apprehensively body flickered to the water's edge, gaze locked on the trapped form of Hatake atop the water's surface, the original Momochi beside him. A water prison. Hatake's mismatched eyes met his—wide, wild, and edged with desperation.

Regulus spared his now-visible teammates a split-second glance, noting that Haruno was pinned under the other Momochi clone's foot, whilst an army of Uzumaki clones swarmed him.

The distraction cost him.

Regulus threw himself backwards at the second clone's abrupt appearance, landing clumsily atop the water. His chakra-grip on the water slipped in his panic, and he tripped as that gigantic sword lashed out, swinging furiously, easily slicing through Itachi's jacket sleeve, cutting deeply across his forearm. He choked down a cry of pain, inwardly cursing as he clumsily flickered away, heart lurching in his chest.

He stumbled as he landed in the thick of the mist, forearm throbbing and pale fingers slick with dripping crimson, brain rapidly sifting through his options—

He arched his spine backwards as the sword whistled through the air overhead. It was followed by a sharp, brutal kick to his knees that had him sprawling backwards, spine jarring on impact. The air was punched out of his chest in a pain so blinding his breath stopped, agony bursting in his lungs.

He frantically threw himself to the side as that fucking sword swung down towards him again, pain biting up and down his bloodied forearm. The sword imbedded itself deep in the soil mere centimetres from his head with a deafening *thud*, and Regulus' ears rung with mindless terror.

In reaction to his fear, the Sharingan flickered on, inky eyes swallowed by gleaming red. Regulus stared, now able to see Momochi's muscles tense and coil in preparation to wrench his gargantuan sword out from where it was lodged in the cold, hard dirt. He moved and within a split-second, Regulus held a kunai in trembling fingers.

Water clone, his mind sung, *water clone, waterclonewaterclone, water clone—*

Momochi's muscles bunched as he heaved, lifting the sword—and Regulus struck, darting up like a viper, jamming the kunai deep into the Momochi clone's thigh. It exploded with a roar, water showering down over Regulus like a torrential downpour, drenching him to the bone.

He collapsed, terrified and breathless, blinking his Sharingan off, on the dirt and let out a wet, splintered laugh that had bordered on hysteric, throat thick with the beginning of tears.

Regulus set his jaw against the pain, hauling himself onto wobbly legs. He stared at his shaking fingers, slick with blood, beads of crimson splattering onto the dirt. Regulus swallowed hard, tore his gaze away and squinted, struggling to see through the mist.

He latched onto Uzumaki's stupidly large and brilliant chakra signature and crept towards it, heart in his throat, pulse thundering in his ears, as the echoing sounds of Uzumaki and Haruno's battle grew louder.

The mist seemed to part for him as he made his way forward, Uzumaki's cries becoming clearer and louder with each step, until Regulus could vaguely make out blurry figures moving in the distance.

He held himself still as Hatake came into view, gaze flicking to the real Momochi, who was observing his teammates' battle with his clone with a deeply amused expression. Regulus took a deep breath and quickly thrust his arm out, hissing, *"Accio!"*

It wasn't all that powerful due to his injuries and scattered concentration, but the real Momochi's sword—which was strapped across his back—moved, pulling in Regulus' direction. It was enough to snap Momochi's focus and unbalance him, leaving him stumbling forward, hand breaking contact with the water prison.

Hatake, despite his uselessness so far, was Regulus best shot at survival.

He glanced back at his teammates, noting that Uzumaki had successfully saved Haruno, and the two were now cheering Hatake on. He huffed an exasperated breath, watching Hatake and Momochi's ensuing fight with disinterested eyes, absently noting that Momochi had dissolved the mist—most likely to conserve chakra.

He glanced down at his bleeding forearm, clamping a hand over the gushing blood. By the time Hatake had Momochi pinned against a tree, Regulus was exhausted, dizzy and in pain, shivering and cold.

"—You're going to die." Regulus blinked. He'd never heard Hatake sound so cold, so serious before.

Uzumaki yelped as Momochi's neck was pierced with rogue senbons. That icy chakra from earlier reappeared and Regulus went dead still. It hadn't been his imagination, then. There was a chilling little giggle from above and Regulus tilted his head up, unease rippling down his spine at the sight of a mask staring back at them. "You're right. He's dead." This shinobi had been here the entire time—just watching, lingering in the trees. Regulus frowned.

Hatake crouched down, fingers on Momochi's throat, feeling for his pulse, then nodded in agreement.

"Thank you very much," the masked-nin bowed courteously. "I have been searching for the opportunity to kill Zabuza for a long time."

Regulus pressed his lips into a thin line.

“That mask…” Hatake blinked in surprise. “You’re a Kirigakure hunter-nin.” That certainly didn’t ease Regulus’ suspicions, only worsened them.

The ‘hunter-nin’ paused. Then, “Impressive. You’re correct.”

“What the hell!?” Uzumaki blurted out, pointing an accusing finger at the masked figure. The rest of Uzumaki’s outburst was lost to Regulus as his ears rung, a spike of pain ricocheting inside his head, vision blurring as he swayed on his feet. Blood loss. He tightened his grip on his wounded forearm, digging his nails into the laceration, using the burning pain to ground himself.

“—Your battle is over, and now I must dispose of this body.” Red flags were waving in Regulus’ face. “Farewell.”

He blinked at the now empty space. “You’re going to regret letting them go,” Regulus muttered absently. He glanced up to find Hatake already staring at him, gaze cool and pensive. He slotted his *hitai-ate* over his Sharingan eye, keeping eye-contact with Regulus all the while.

“Thank you, everyone,” Tazuna’s jubilant voice sliced through the air. “You all should come over to my house for a while, and relax.”

Then, Hatake collapsed.

“Kakashi-sensei!” Uzumaki panicked, arms flailing about. “What’s wrong with him?”

Regulus sighed. “It’s just chakra exhaustion,” he said sourly.

Haruno gasped, dismayed. “Sasuke-kun! You’re hurt.” Regulus scowled. Her observational skills were truly unprecedented, he thought sarcastically. She was at his side in an instant, hands fluttering uselessly around his injured arm.

“I’m fine,” he snapped. Regulus angled his head at Hatake’s helpless form. “We’ll need to carry him.” Haruno nodded, biting her lip anxiously, gaze still glued to Regulus’ messy, bloody forearm. *“Go.”* Her green eyes snapped back up to meet his obsidian ones and she nodded hastily, scrambling over to assist Uzumaki with Hatake.

Hatake was to be bed-ridden for an entire week. From one battle. That he barely won. How pathetic.

“—Most likely, Zabuza is alive.”

Hatake stared at him as he spoke—most likely recalling Regulus’ words before he collapsed. He stared back, unperturbed. So Hatake knew, or at least, he’d suspected. He’d had his fingers on Momochi’s pulse, on the most vulnerable part of his neck; Hatake could have easily slit his throat. But he hadn’t. Then again, Hatake had reached his limit, and if he’d

killed Momochi, then the three genin would've had to fight his accomplice alone. So, he could begrudgingly, very reluctantly admit that Hatake had made a good judgement call.

That was, unless, he'd only just figured it out now, and had genuinely believed, at the time, that the masked shinobi was truly a hunter-nin and that Momochi was dead. He observed the sheepish, yet frazzled look in Hatake's eye, and gathered it was the latter. He wasn't even surprised; Hatake was proving to be hopeless.

"What the hell do you mean?! You checked and said that he was dead!"

"Yeah, I did. But that was most likely just a momentary death," Hatake sighed. He looked utterly exhausted. "So, now, we'll have to prepare for the worst."

"Sensei," Haruno turned an expression of wintry disapproval upon Hatake. "You can barely even move." Uzumaki nodded emphatically, blue eyes narrowed, arms folded across his chest.

Hatake merely chuckled and flapped a placating hand. Regulus' eye twitched, irritation clawing up his throat. "I'll be fine. Besides, it'll be you punks that are doing the training."

"Training," Regulus echoed, wondering if he sounded as incredulous as he felt. Was Hatake serious? Was he so delusional, so deep in denial that he failed to see how utterly useless of a suggestion that was?

Haruno seemed to share his concerns. "What is a little training going to do?" She snapped, nostrils flaring. "Our enemy is a shinobi that you struggled against, even with the Sharingan!"

Regulus slid his teeth across his bottom lip, feeling the sharp drag against chapped skin. The Sharingan *was* a ridiculously over-powered dojutsu, but in the eye-socket of a non-Uchiha? It was a burden, a hindrance. It clearly inhibited Hatake, draining his already shallow chakra pool at an abnormally fast rate. Hatake had spent the majority of the battle trapped, stationary within a water prison, and yet he was *still* out of commission for an entire week.

"Sakura, who saved me whilst I was struggling?" Hatake eye-smiled. "You guys are growing rapidly." Regulus' face spasmed. Was Hatake trying to appeal to their pride? He had no interest in false platitudes, offered only to excuse his own unpreparedness and terrible teaching.

"Says the man who screamed at us to run because he was convinced that we were all going to *die.*" He hadn't realised he'd spoken out-loud until three pairs of shocked, wide-eyes turned on him.

"I'll admit, you guys weren't prepared for that fight, but—"

"And whose fault is that?" His voice had gone arctic, the words cracking through the air like a whip. He expected Uzumaki or Haruno to jump to Hatake's defence, but they both remained silent. It was telling.

Regulus hauled himself to his feet and stalked out, slamming the door shut behind him.

“You’re all going to die.” Regulus stared down at the solemn little boy in an ugly bucket hat. Finally. A fellow realist.

“What the hell did you say, you little brat!?” Uzumaki hollered, comically offended. Regulus sighed, exasperated and exhausted, pointedly turning back to his breakfast.

“There’s no way you can win against Gatou.” Regulus was actually far more concerned by all the goddamn fucking shinobi that the man kept hiring.

“You brat!” Uzumaki stood up so abruptly that his chair scraped obnoxiously on wooden floor. “I’ll—”

“Why are you getting angry at a child?” Haruno slammed her hands down on the table, causing Regulus’ breakfast crockery to rattle, the tea sloshing over the edge of the cup. He closed his eyes in dismay.

Uzumaki steamrolled over her. “—I am a super hero who will one day become an incredible shinobi and the Hokage.” Regulus put his head in his hands. “I don’t know this Gatou guy, but he’s got nothing on me!” Regulus hadn’t been this insufferable at twelve, had he?

“What are you, stupid?” The sheer amount of derision in the child’s voice was admirable. “There’s no such thing as a hero.” Uzumaki let out a spluttering cry of indignation. “If you don’t want to die, then you should leave.” Regulus caught Uzumaki’s eye and gestured emphatically to the child, as if to say *‘See? Even the brat agrees with me.’*

Uzumaki scowled, folded his arms across his chest, turned his nose up and looked away from Regulus with a loud *humph.* Regulus sunk dejectedly in his chair. Uzumaki was the driving force behind their continuation of this Salazar-forsaken mission. If Regulus could change his mind, then Team 7 could leave whilst they were all still alive.

Uzumaki brashly declared he was going to *‘teach the damn brat a lesson,’* and thundered up the stairs.

Then, Hatake slumped into the dining room. Regulus tensed. He flexed his fingers on his chopsticks, then slowly set them down, standing to leave. It was petty. Immature. Yet, Regulus didn’t care. He lacked the energy to deal with the fallout of last night’s outburst.

He sat down, crossed legged on the tatami mat of their temporary bedroom, pulling Itachi’s bloody, torn jacket onto his lap. He bit down on the inside of his cheek. He wasn’t attached to Itachi, not specifically. Regulus knew he had ‘older brother’ issues, and was unintentionally projecting his unresolved relationship with Sirius onto Itachi—which was pathetic, because Itachi wasn’t even his brother. He swallowed hard. Well. Technically. Itachi was his brother; he was in Sasuke’s body now. But he’d already stolen Sasuke’s life, he couldn’t steal his brother, too. Even if said brother was a kin-slaying, potentially psychopathic—

Regulus was jerked from his spiralling musings by a sharp knock. He glanced up, only to find Tazuna's daughter—*Tsunami*—standing in the doorway. "Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you. I just wanted to apologise for earlier." Regulus blinked slowly. "My husband, Inari's stepfather, was publicly executed by Gatou for standing against him. Inari, h-he was there, he saw, when Gatou—"

Ah. Had she assumed he left because of Inari's outburst?

"It's fine. I rather appreciate his frankness." It was true. Uzumaki's blinding optimism was exhausting. "Uzumaki has a tendency to look at the world through rose-tinted glasses. Reality is rarely so kind."

"You don't find it odd that a child his age is so cynical?" Tsunami bit her lip, wringing her hands nervously.

"For a civilian child like Inari? Perhaps. But I don't fault him for his outlook," Regulus said quietly, honestly. "Tragedy tends to make cynics out of the best of us." It was most likely not what Tsunami wanted to hear, but Regulus was incapable of giving false platitudes.

Her dark eyes darted to Itachi's jacket. "Oh," she exhaled softly. "I can fix that tear for you. It's the least I could do." Regulus swallowed around the lump in his throat, thrown off-kilter by her selfless kindness. He held up the jacket, fingers trembling slightly.

"Please," his expression softened just a fraction of a degree, offering Tsunami his first genuine smile since he'd woken up as Uchiha Sasuke.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

I am so terribly sorry for the late update. I am absolutely floored by the support I received on this fic, thank you all so much~

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Regulus stared, unimpressed.

But, to be fair, Hatake looked very unimpressive, especially with those bloody crutches. Regulus struggled to fathom how a single battle—one that he'd barely participated in—had wounded Hatake thus. It was hard to equate this with the feared, competent, deadly shinobi listed in the bingo book.

Hatake shifted his weight, leaning heavily on his left crutch, posture slouched and lazy. "Alright, so. I promised that we'd start training, and we will—" Hatake shot a quelling look at Uzumaki, whose lips had parted to, presumably, interrupt "—but first, I wanted to talk to you about chakra."

How anti-climatic. A reputation like Hatake's came with *expectations.* He'd been their sensei for two months, but Team 7 was only just now having their first training session, and it was on the Academy basics. Haruno's lips were twisted into a confused, irritable frown, as if she, too, thought that this was a waste of time, which it was. There was no need—

"What's chakra?"

The silence that fell was deafening.

"You're a genin and you don't know that?" Haruno's voice dripped with incredulity. "What did you even learn at the Academy?"

"Hehe," Uzumaki rubbed the back of his neck, sheepish. "I used to sleep during the hard classes."

Was he serious? Regulus' rage was incandescent, a fire under his skin. He choked back a bitter, mirthless laugh and dropped his head back, staring blankly up at the rustling leaves atop the towering trees as Haruno, voice thick with impatience and irritation, explained the *very* basics to an increasingly perplexed Uzumaki.

"I don't get it," was his dumb response. It made Regulus want to commit acts of extreme violence—like murder, which was, conveniently, legal here. Hatake, in his first real act of teaching, took over the explanation, only to belittle their inability to effectively use chakra.

Well. If someone had deigned to teach them, as was his *job*, then—

“But I’ll teach you how to control it, through very thorough training!”

Regulus’ eye twitched. “Which is?”

“Hmm?” He blinked. Slowly. Like a cat. Then, “Tree climbing!”

He choked. That was it? *Tree clim*—“And if we can already do that?”

He ignored Uzumaki and Haruno’s surprised looks as Hatake’s single, dark-grey eye swung to him. His ability to do so couldn’t be a surprise—Hatake had witnessed Regulus water walk during the battle, and one typically learnt tree climbing first. “Maa, care to give us a demonstration, then?”

Regulus licked his lips and turned to stare at the thick, dark trunk beside him, then moved, running up the length of the tree. It was as easy as breathing. He stood at the top, body parallel to the ground, leaves tickling his bare arms and legs, feet stuck to the rough bark, staring down at the figures below until Hatake waved him back down.

He casually strolled down the side of the trunk, then pushed off, feet squelching as he landed on the damp, dewy grass.

He turned to Hatake, who stared back, expression unreadable. Regulus arched a single dark brow. It had been tense between them since his outburst the night before. Regulus didn’t regret his words, only that it had resulted in this palpable, stifling awkwardness between their team—if their group of incompatible individuals could even be called such a thing.

“Teme!” Uzumaki cried, ignorant of the tension, drawing all attention to him. “How did you do that?”

Regulus gestured at Hatake. “Why don’t you ask *sensei.*” Uzumaki, oblivious to the goading undertone to Regulus’ words, stared up at Hatake expectantly, blue eyes bright and guileless. Regulus swallowed, throat dry. He both envied and pitied Uzumaki’s naivety.

He exhaled. The humid air felt as if it were pressing against his skin. The Land of Waves’ tropical climate was borderline intolerable, especially to one who was acclimatised to dreary British weather, or more recently, Konoha’s dry heat.

Hatake, at the end of his explanation, tossed kunais at Haruno and Uzumaki’s feet, instructing them to begin. “Sasuke.” Regulus' dark gaze flicked up. “With me.” Hatake turned and hobbled further into the trees, a reluctant Regulus trailing after him.

“Who taught you?”

He stepped over a twisted, protruding tree root. “I taught myself.” Ever since Regulus had witnessed the shinobi run up walls, leap over rooftops, dash from branch to branch at an impossible speed, he’d *ached* to try. It was, most likely, the closest to flying he would get in this world.

And oh, how Regulus missed flying. He'd been Slytherin's seeker, and James Potter, much to Regulus' smug satisfaction, had always *hated* how brilliant Regulus had been at Quidditch. It had been a source of amusement for him, watching how utterly frustrated Potter would get whenever Regulus led Slytherin to victory.

He'd had no tutor, no one to guide him, so he'd stuck to quietly observing the shinobi, and made guesses as to how it worked. He'd accomplished it with nothing but his own intelligence and sheer determination to succeed.

There was a hum of acknowledgement from Hatake as they entered a small, open clearing. "Your chakra affinities," he came to a halt, turning to face Regulus, staring down at him with an eye like a rolling storm. "Do you know them?"

He shook his head. Hatake withdrew a sheet of paper—*oh.* "I take it you recognise this?" Regulus nodded. *Chakra paper.* Hatake handed it over, studying him, dark grey eye curious.

Regulus flexed his fingers, channelling his chakra. The paper wrinkled near immediately, curling into itself, before catching on fire, burning until all that remained was scattered flecks of ash that rested on his open palm, swirling in the soft, warm breeze.

"A major affinity for lightning," came Hatake's murmur, "and a minor for fire." Regulus dropped his ash-covered hand, letting it dangle loosely at his side, staring up at Hatake. "You're not surprised."

He wasn't. There's always been an unmistakable thrum of static electricity running alongside his veins. Besides, Sasuke was an Uchiha—the minor fire affinity was self-explanatory. Regulus wondered, idly, what *his* chakra nature would've been, had he his own body, his own chakra and not Sasuke's.

"I have a lightning affinity, too." Regulus already knew that. He said as much. Hatake blinked, unasked questions flitting behind his dark grey eye, his distinctive ozone chakra flickering. Hatake cleared his throat, somewhat awkwardly. "I can teach you a lightning-based technique, if you'd like."

It was a peace offering, an olive branch. Regulus stared—eyes of glittering black ice searching and assessing. Hatake stared back patiently, unbothered by the scrutiny.

Then, Regulus exhaled, nodding his acceptance.

It wasn't a ninjutsu, as Regulus had expected, but the hand signs for moulding basic lightning chakra.

It was not a technique Regulus would've chosen for himself, seeing as it was ultimately useless, but he was unsurprised by it's simplicity. It could be a test, Hatake's way of gauging his skill level, or he wanted Regulus to build a strong foundation, by having him start from the very basics.

It only took Regulus until later that very afternoon to master it, during which Haruno had successfully 'climbed' her tree. Uzumaki, however, had barely progressed a quarter of the way up, much to his *very* vocal disappointment.

The following day, a *still* incapacitated Hatake assigned Haruno and Regulus to guard duty at the Bridge, whilst a disgruntled Uzumaki remained in the forest, screaming incoherent insults at the trees, as though they were to blame for his incompetency.

He sat on the edge of the Bridge, dangling his swinging legs, staring out at the vast expanse of glimmering blue, stretching out beyond the horizon, the sound of ongoing construction filling his ears. He stretched out his senses, searching for Momochi's and the 'hunter-nin's' chakra, occasionally practising moulding lightning chakra, electrifying his fingertips.

The were no shinobi in the Land of Waves.

Regulus had originally been disappointed, jealous even, that he hadn't transmigrated here—because *of course*, after all the horrid deeds he'd committed, he wouldn't be given a simple life, free to do as he pleased, away from impossible expectations.

But, now?

He stared at the poverty-stricken streets of Wave, at the desperate beggars, at the starving, gaunt children with hollow, deadened eyes, and thought, for the first time, that Regulus was fortunate to be Uchiha Sasuke.

Uzumaki approached Regulus during breakfast on the fifth day, uncharacteristic purple smudges bruising the skin beneath his brightly burning, too-blue eyes.

"Teme," he greeted. Regulus blinked drowsily, still only half-awake, fingers tightening around his warm cup of tea. "I was, er, wondering if you had any, you know, tips?"

He exhaled on a sigh, lowering his cup. Regulus stared, contemplating the determination still simmering behind Uzumaki's eyes despite his constant failures. Regulus huffed. "Come with me." He stood in one smooth, elegant motion, sweeping past a frozen Uzumaki and out the door.

"Teme, wait!" Regulus didn't. He walked through the lush, green undergrowth, halting before the familiar towering trees. Uzumaki, panting and flushed red, skidded to a halt beside him, scowling. "I told you to wai—"

"Show me." Uzumaki spluttered. Regulus flung out a pale hand, gesturing at the trees. Uzumaki frowned, his indecision evident. His cerulean eyes narrowed, eight kinds of suspicious, but after a long moment, relented.

He took eight steps before he was blasted backwards off the tree trunk.

Uzumaki scrambled to his feet, gaze hard, daring Regulus to mock him. He wouldn't. Not for this. "Use less chakra."

"*Hah?"*

Regulus sighed impatiently. "Uzumaki. The amount of chakra you possess is beyond ridiculous." Uzumaki blinked, dumbfounded. "You instinctively overcompensate."

"You want me to use less chakra?" Regulus nodded. "Are you tricking me? Is this a trick?"

"No," Regulus snapped, jaw tight, fists clenched at the genuine suspicion in Uzumaki's tone. He spun on his heel, stalking away, ignoring Uzumaki's cries of his name. In true Black dramatics, he vowed to never do something nice, just for the sake of it, *ever* again.

Regulus collapsed in a clearing with soft, vivid green grass and lovely, sweet-smelling florals and herbs. He stared up at the canopy, sparse light glinting through the rustling leaves, and exhaled, breath expelling from his lungs in a heavy *woosh.*

He drifted in and out of consciousness, sleep clawing at him, begging for him to surrender. He almost gave in to its tantalising call, when—

Regulus went dead still at the approaching flicker of icy chakra. The chakra flared brightly, so unlike their first meeting, when it had been tightly coiled, near-invisible as they hid in the tree-line. Regulus twitched. Was the 'hunter-nin' so self-assured in their own abilities as to carelessly broadcast their presence? Regulus thought back to the speed and precision with which the senbons pierced Momochi's neck, and decided that *yes*, their confidence wasn't unfounded. It didn't make it any less idiotic, though.

Their footsteps were non-existent on the grass, and if it weren't for their chakra signature moving closer, Regulus wouldn't have noticed their presence at all. It was an unnerving thought. The chakra signature stilled several metres away. He kept his eyes shut, feigning sleep, every muscle coiled, tight, like a spring.

Regulus did not want to fight, especially not against them. He'd lose.

There was a long, extended pause in which the signature didn't move. Frustration had Regulus blinking his bleary, dark eyes open. He slowly, cautiously turned his head, cheek brushing against the soft strands of grass, squinting at—*oh*.

The 'hunter-nin' was kneeling, curled over an array of various plants and herbs that were carefully picked and closely scrutinised, then stored in their woven basket. They'd discarded the mask, too—though, a sheet of sleek, dark hair shielded their face from view.

As if sensing eyes upon their person, their head snapped up, quick as a whip, gaze instantly locking with Regulus'.

He inhaled sharply, staring into wide, warm, dark-brown eyes. The 'hunter-nin' was *young*—startling so, eerily beautiful, slender, and incredibly androgynous. Their ankle-length kimono

was pink and sleeveless, with a simple white obi tied around their waist, and a choker around their neck.

They stood, movements slow and deliberate, discarding their basket on the ground as they moved towards Regulus' prone form. They kneeled down beside him, keeping a solid metre of distance between them.

"Hello." *By Salazar*—they sounded young, too. He raked his dark gaze over their beautiful features. The 'hunter-nin' couldn't be older than sixteen.

"You're young." The words slipped out, unbidden and incredulous. The 'hunter-nin' blinked, brown eyes soft with confusion. "I had thought you older, considering your skill."

Their lovely face shuttered like a door being slammed shut. "I'm sorry. I think you've mistaken me for someone else."

Regulus' lip quirked. "I don't think so, *hunter-nin.*"

They swallowed hard, throat bobbing, rattled. "How did you know?" Regulus arched a condescending brow. He was not one to reveal his secrets.

"So," Regulus begun nonchalantly, "are you going to kill me?" They straightened, eyes flaring wide in surprised alarm. That's a *no*, then. Regulus relaxed infinitesimally, his thin and pale fingers tugging at the strands of grass. "You're from Kiri." It was poised as more of a question then the statement he intended it to be. The Kiri hunter-nin mask could've easily been stolen off a corpse, after all.

"I *was*." They paused. "I left."

Regulus was envious. He wished to leave Konoha, but with his current skill level, he'd be murdered by a rogue-nin within an hour. Besides, he was so accustomed to wealth, to luxury, that slumming it in the dirt would likely send him to an early grave, or cause a mental break.

"What's Konoha like?" Regulus blinked, startled, staring up into wide, curious chocolate eyes. "They say it's the nicest village."

Regulus barked out a ragged laugh. "Perhaps. But, it's *still* a shinobi village," he remarked, mirth glittering in black eyes. The ex-Kiri-nin blinked, eyes wide and uncertain. He just exhaled on a sigh, gaze shifting to the canopy above.

Regulus had, within a month of awakening in Sasuke's body, paid a visit to the public library, desperate to bridge the gap in his knowledge. He'd combed through the sections available to an Academy student, collecting texts on politics, law, Clan history, inter-nation relations, past-wars, the shinobi system, bingo books—anything and everything to help Regulus make sense of this abysmal world.

Konoha had been painted as the 'nice village.' Regulus barely stifled a snort. It was still a military dictatorship. It still followed the same doctrine that Kiri, Suna, Kumo, and Iwa did. It still indoctrinated impressionable children and encouraged them to pursue the path of a

shinobi, coating their lessons in subtle propaganda, trapping them in a life of killing on behalf of a village that did not care, that would simply replace them once they died.

It was clever, he'd admit. Regulus' parents had done something similar; instilled bigotry at such a young age where it would be unthinkable to question it—unless you were Sirius, apparently. It was so brilliantly manipulatively that the Slytherin part of him couldn't help but admire the efficiency of the system. Regulus had not grown up alongside the 'Will of Fire' drivel, which meant that he could literally *see* it in action. Regulus would know how effective it was; he was a product of it himself.

He hadn't even known that there was another way of thinking until Sirius had returned from his first year at Hogwarts with all these opinions that contradicted everything Regulus had ever been taught. He was a Black, a pure-blood, he was worth more than others, above them, their betters. It had been hammered into him since he took his first breath, and it was the only truth he'd ever known.

Sirius had tried to uproot his very sense of self, and Regulus had lashed out, scared that something so central to his very identity was a lie. He had refused to listen, and had clung onto his family's beliefs.

Look where that got him.

Regulus, lost deep in his thoughts as he was, jerked, startled when the ex-Kiri-nin spoke up, shattering the silence.

"Can I ask you something?" Their voice was soft, gentle. He nodded, dark gaze sliding back to them. "Why do you fight?"

Regulus twitched. "Why do *you?"*

Their brown gaze shifted, eyes moving to their lap where their fingers fidgeted restlessly. They sucked in a sharp breath, peering up at Regulus through dark lashes. "To protect someone precious to me."

Regulus face spasmed, expression contorting. "I see." *Hufflepuff*, he mentally assigned. He'd always liked Hufflepuffs, admired their qualities—but found them jarring to converse with. The ex-Kiri-nin stared, face expectant and open. His lips thinned into a grim line. He had no true reason, but if he had to give voice to one, it'd be—"To survive."

They stared at him with sad, kind, understanding brown eyes. Regulus swallowed tightly, averting his gaze. "I can understand that." They rose to their feet in one swift, graceful movement. "I'm sorry, but I must go."

"Of course."

The ex-Kiri-nin smiled, soft and small—sad with something unidentifiable underneath—and collected their basket, disappearing into the trees.

It was on the seventh evening that Uzumaki reported his success.

Finally.

“Starting tomorrow, you’ll also help protect Tazuna-san,” Hatake instructed.

“Why do you guys bother to train so hard?!” Uzumaki flailed, almost flinging himself off his chair in shock at the abrupt outburst. “No matter how hard you train, you’re still no match for Gatou’s men.” Inari was crying—ugly, snotty sobs. Ugh. *Children.* “No matter what glorious claims you make or how hard you work, when facing the strong, the weak will only end up getting killed!”

He wasn’t wrong. But the reiteration of his impending, potential death was beginning to get irritating. Regulus slipped out of the kitchen as Inari’s voice grew shrill, unwilling to subject his poor, bleeding ears to more.

Despite Hatake’s request and Uzumaki’s enthusiastic agreement, Team 7 left for the Bridge the following morning without him.

Uzumaki, apparently, required extended bed rest if he was going to be of any use. Regulus highly doubted he’d be of any true help regardless of his energy levels, but wisely kept his opinion to himself.

There was an alarmed cry up ahead and Regulus peered out from behind Hatake’s shoulder, face twisting into an irritated scowl, stomach churning at the sight of the dying, bleeding construction workers strewn haphazardly across the Bridge, limbs twisted and contorted at odd angles. It looked like the aftermath of one of Bella’s more tame experiments.

He could understand—appreciate, even—a clean, quick kill. But *this?* He’d always despised violence for the sake of violence.

Momochi’s handiwork, he guessed, or maybe the ex-Kiri-nin’s. He glanced about. The two missing-nin’s chakra signatures were, much to Regulus’ deep irritation, no where to be found—or intentionally concealed.

Then, the air dampened, thickening and saturating with a familiar mist. He couldn’t help the cold ebb of fear that started to crawl down his spine. Hatake ushered them into formation—the three of standing standing in a circle around Tazuna. A truly useless gesture. Regulus and Haruno would be cut down in a blink if Momochi so desired.

Then, the area was drowned in potent killing intent. Regulus inhaled sharply, limbs trembling under the oppressive, bone-chilling weight of *fearterrordeath.* The mist was now as thick as a cloud, near-completely obscuring his vision.

“Long time no see, Kakashi…”

He flinched as *seven* bloody Momochi water clones suddenly materialised, encircling and surrounding them. Oh, how he *hated* clones.

Then, Hatake, in his first useful act, *moved*—faster than Regulus' non-Sharingan eyes could follow, shredding and slashing, reducing the water clones to a shower of icy-cold water that left Regulus looking like a drowned rat.

There was a low, menacing chuckle to his left and Regulus turned, only to find Momochi and the 'hunter-nin' standing several metres away. Hatake's voice went flat, grim. "Zabuza is mine, I'll leave his comrade to you."

Fear lodged itself in Regulus throat and he tried to convulsively swallow around it. He, suddenly and desperately, wished that Uzumaki were here. He was extraordinary at attracting attention to himself, at making himself the main target. But he wasn't here. Which just left Regulus and Haruno—

He hastily threw himself backwards, narrowly avoiding taking a kunai to the face as the ex-Kiri-nin appeared directly before him in a spinning whirlwind.

The 'hunter-nin' paused, hesitating. "I don't want to have to kill you—" Regulus made a short, sharp, derisive sound "—so, *please*, don't give me a reason to."

Regulus canted his head to the side.

"You won't win," they added gently, as if Regulus was not already very aware of his impending death, "so, stand down."

Was the offer genuine, or was this all a ploy to lower his guard? It truly wasn't necessary. Regulus would be killed just as easily with his guard up. Did they think him a threat? It was a great overestimation of his skills that was as flattering as it was ridiculous. He ached for his wand. This fight would go very differently if he had it. He, once again, lamented his inaptitude for wandless magic.

The ex-Kiri-nin seemed to take Regulus' silent contemplation as rejection, because next thing he knew—

Well. The one-handed signing was impressive, as was the technique *Hijutsu: Sensatsu Suishou*—Secret Technique: Thousand Flying Water Needles of Death. Regulus would have appreciated it a great deal more if it wasn't currently being used in an attempt to murder him. He stared at the long, thin water needles that encircled him, mind whirling as he rapidly sorted through possible solutions—

He flicked through the hand-signs for *Shunshin* and landed several metres away, the barrage of water needles striking the spot he stood a mere second before, the shards of water coalescing in a thunderous explosion, the force of it throwing the ex-Kiri-nin backwards. Regulus flinched as stray icy-droplets showered down upon him, features twisting into a disgruntled scowl.

"Haku," came Momochi's irritable, deep drawl, "stop fooling around. At this rate we'll be driven back."

"Well," the newly-dubbed Haku said. "We can't have that."

Then, the temperature rapidly plummeted, the misty air gaining a sharp, biting chill. He shivered, his wet clothing clinging to him like a second skin, the sudden gust of icy wind cutting through him like knives, his breath a cloud of frost.

"Hijutsu: Makyou Hyoushou." Secret Technique: Demonic Mirroring Ice Crystals.

Regulus stared, transfixed, as several large ice mirrors formed, surrounding him completely, each bearing an identical replica of Haku, as if they occupied them all simultaneously. It was beautiful, in a morbid way—seeing as the glittering, crystalline structures were going to play an instrumental role in his death.

He couldn't help but giggle. It was bitter. And desperate. And manic. He was *fucked.*

"Shall I begin?" The origin of Haku's voice was impossible to pinpoint. The icy cold air seeped into his skin, his every breath a frost-thickened cloud. Regulus' dark gaze flittered between all the identical reflections, panic spiking through his nerves. *"I'll show you my real speed."*

Regulus blinked, dark lashes fluttering. What—?

He jerked, a strangled noise escaping his throat as he reached for the senbon suddenly piercing his right bicep, mouth tight with pain. He flinched, recoiling, as Haku struck again, a senbon impaling his left shoulder. There was a short pause, and then—

Pain. It was blinding and instantaneous.

It was an explosion of thousands of tiny needles puncturing his soft, pale skin. He bit down on his bottom lip, a scream trapped behind his teeth, pain searing across the surface of his skin like hot pokers. He bent over, curling his injured arms over his head, gritting his teeth. There was blood—thick, crimson rivulets, dripping down his arms and legs, staining his hands, and splattering across his torso. Pure, unadulterated panic barked through his head as his legs gave out, knees hitting the concrete with a jarring *thud.* It was nowhere near as bad as the Cruciatus, but it was still unfathomably painful.

Regulus had known the outcome before the battle had even commenced, but the reality of the situation hadn't truly sunk in until now. It hit him, abruptly, with cold and clear clarity, like a slap across the face.

He was going to die. *Again.*

Regulus' insides recoiled in shock, mind scrambling, brain filled with white noise and growing alarm—

His panic swelled and expanded inside him like a venomous bubble, compressing his lungs, and it was as if all his frustration and despair threatened to explode—

There was a loud, sharp, piercing sound that sliced through his thoughts like a knife cutting butter. It sounded distinctly like glass shattering, fracturing into a thousand tiny crystalline shards. His head shot up, quick as a whip. He stared, dazed and dumbstruck, at the splintered

remains of the ice mirrors. His only consolation was that Haku looked as astonished as Regulus felt.

"That's impossible," they whispered, soft and disbelieving, voicing Regulus' spiralling thoughts out loud. How had—*oh.*

It was his *magic*—raw, pure, instinctive magic that had reacted to his emotional state. By Salazar. Regulus hadn't had an outburst like that since he was a *child.*

He collapsed, slumping against the cold concrete, black spots dancing on the edge of his sight. *Blood loss,* he mused dazedly, staring at the crimson pooling underneath him. Regulus' head spun and his ears rung, stomach churning with nausea as the world slowly begun to fade to black.

Chapter End Notes

no, I didn't make Regulus pass out to avoid writing more fight scenes, what are you talking about.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

this is completely unedited and I'm not satisfied with half of the scenes, but here it is~!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The instant Konoha's familiar, towering walls appeared in the distance, Regulus exhaled a sigh of pure, sweet relief—a feeling from which he instantly recoiled. It wasn't that he wanted to return to *Konoha*, Salazar-forbid, but Regulus just wasn't built for the outdoors. He had dirt in places he didn't even know he had, and if one more fucking bug decided that his skin made a convenient landing pad, he was going to *scream*.

After Regulus' dramatic fainting episode—which he'd done with all the flair and finesse of a true scion of the Noble and Ancient House of Black—everything had, predictably, gone to shit.

According to Haruno, who had been all too willing to answer Regulus' questions, Uzumaki had, upon seeing Regulus' bloodied and battered body, somehow come to the immediate and idiotic conclusion that he was *dead*, and promptly went feral—which was flattering, truly. He hadn't thought Uzumaki cared. Like, at all. Their interactions weren't even civil, let alone friendly.

He'd ached to inquire for further details regarding this 'feral' state, but Haruno had looked uneasy so he, in a rare show of consideration, dropped it. Uzumaki had, after kicking Haku's ass—which, *impressive*—made a speech, which essentially translated to 'Uzumaki shouted his ideals until Haku relented.'

Gatou's betrayal wasn't a surprise. What *was* a surprise was Momochi's death at the hands of Gatou's henchmen. He'd thought the man stronger than that. Haku's sacrifice made something ugly curl up in his chest. They'd given their life for a man who'd died soon after. Haku, with their soft, warm eyes and kind smiles, deserved far better.

Then, the bitter, enraged citizens of Wave joined the fight, Team 7 constructed graves for Momochi and Haku, and Uzumaki had the Bridge named after him. It was all very emotional, and his teammates' tears had made Regulus' skin crawl.

"Welcome back, Team 7," gate-keeper #1 greeted, obnoxiously cheerful for a shinobi relegated to the useless task of sitting under the awful, withering sun for all hours of the day. Regulus stalked past them all, ignoring the amiable exchange, aching for a long, hot soak in the luxurious bath in Sasuke's parent's personal bathroom.

"Sasuke." Hatake's firm voice halted Regulus in his tracks. "You still need to fill out a mission report." He spun around, eyebrow twitching, letting his irritation bleed into his

expression. Regulus had no issue with paperwork. In fact, he rather liked it. Just not *now.*

Hatake nodded sagely, mistaking the reason for his irritation. “Paperwork. The true bane of every shinobi’s existence.”

Regulus rolled his ink-like eyes, unsurprised and unamused that Hatake would dismiss something so integral because it was tedious. *Just like Sirius,* he thought, chest twisting with grief. He had sudden respect for all those responsible for chasing after Hatake’s late paperwork.

Hatake blinked, long and slow, appraising. “Oh. Of course,” he muttered, both bewildered and resigned. “You *would* like paperwork, wouldn’t you?”

Regulus made a face of profound mock offence. “Am I being insulted?”

“Maa, I would never,” Hatake eye-smiled. Regulus’ expression twitched tighter, like his mouth was full of chewed glass. “That wouldn’t be very sensei-like of me, would it?”

“Then, it would be perfectly on brand for you,” Regulus gave a bladed grin, eyes gleaming a brilliant blackness, “un-sensei-like behaviour is your speciality, after all.”

Hatake made a wounded noise. “You’ve hurt your poor sensei’s feelings, Sasuke.” He clutched at his chest in a dramatic display of faux hurt.

Regulus huffed. “Let’s just get this over with.” He spun on his heel, marching, with complete and utter resignation, towards the Hokage Tower.

Hatake spawned beside him, easily matching Regulus’ hurried pace with those stupidly long legs of his. “You seem eager to leave us, Sasuke.” There was a sly, teasing lilt to his voice that immediately had Regulus on guard. “Do you, perhaps, have plans?” Hatake waggled his eyebrows suggestively.

Regulus’ face spasmed. Wasn’t Sasuke *twelve?* He didn't dignify Hatake with a response, stalking ahead towards the Hokage Tower.

“Katon: Gokakyu no Jutsu.”

Regulus stood, utterly entranced, by the large burst of burnt orange flames that burst forth from his lips. The air surrounding the billowing fire shimmered, distorted by the scalding heat. The flames reached towards the crystalline blue sky far above, the smell of charred wood seeping into the air.

Fire, in all its raw destructive glory, was *so* beautiful.

That was how Hatake found him, sitting crossed legged on the grass, greedily watching those blistering, untameable flames eagerly devouring all in its path. Hatake gingerly sat beside him, remaining silent for a long moment, then, “you’re very late, you know.”

Regulus made an acknowledging noise in the back of his throat, dark eyes still watching the flames curl through the air.

Hatake sighed. “We have a mission.”

Right. He’d forgotten about that. “Another D-Rank?”

“Hmm.”

There was a sharp *crack* as a large tree branch snapped, tumbling to the ground in a swirl of embers. Regulus’ lips curled into a tiny smirk. Sirius and Bella had adored fire, too, always setting things ablaze as children. Regulus had never joined, far too terrified of the consequences, but had watched his elder brother and cousin burn things with a bright, enraptured smile on his face.

Perhaps, it made sense, in a twisted way, that Regulus was reborn as an Uchiha.

Bella had cackled beside him, full of glee, as he eagerly, with a joy foreign to him, set Muggle buildings ablaze during Death Eater raids. He’d relished in it, watching flames devour the Muggle homes. Though, he’d been careful to never allow a Muggle to get caught in the crossfire, especially after the first time. Regulus would never forget the shrill, pained screams, the smell of rotting, burning flesh—

Regulus, with great reluctance, tore his eyes from the flames, finally meeting Hatake’s gaze. There was cautious apprehension in Hatake’s single eye. Regulus’ lips thinned. Hatake had been doing that more often as of late; observing Regulus with a wariness that, in his opinion, was greatly undeserved.

Yes, Regulus took great joy in setting the forest in the Uchiha compound ablaze, but it was more to relieve his boredom, rather than anything malicious—a boredom which Hatake was largely to blame for.

If Team 7 expected their very near-death experience in Wave to have awoken Hatake’s ‘sensei-instincts,’ they were horribly wrong. Hatake had no desire to continue with the training he’d finally begun in Wave. It was though he wanted them to die a horrible death—defenceless and unprepared.

Hatake had turned back to his usual methods of acting as a distant bystander, refusing to teach them, and having Team 7 complete inane D-Rank after inane D-Rank. This had been the pattern for the past two and a half months since their return from Wave. It was mind-numbingly dull, and setting things ablaze had become Regulus’ sole source of entertainment.

Regulus trailed after Hatake, heading towards the designated meeting spot.

“Teme,” came Uzumaki’s accusing growl upon his arrival. Regulus rubbed at his tired eyes. The days had a tendency to blur together, and he’d genuinely believed today was Team 7’s day off. Evidently not. *“You—”*

“Are you okay, Sasuke-kun?” He blinked, shifting his dull gaze to Haruno. Her cheeks flushed a deep pink at the attention. He bit back a wince. Her crush was as irritating as ever.

“I’m fine,” he waved a hand dismissively. Haruno frowned but didn’t push.

Hatake clapped his hands together, drawing their attention. He eye-smiled with obnoxious cheer. Regulus wanted to set him on fire. “Today, my cute little genin, your mission is… weeding!”

“Again?!” Uzumaki demanded, dismayed. “I’m so sick and tired of all these lame missions. I want one where I can, you know, shine!”

Regulus huffed. Hatake let out a long, tired sigh. Haruno scowled.

“Maa, maybe next time,” Hatake offered a blatantly insincere eye-smile.

Uzumaki frowned, folding his arms across his chest. “You say that every ti—*hey, wait*—!” Hatake disappeared in a swirl of leaves, leaving behind a single sheet of paper. Regulus watched it flutter to the floor. “I can’t believe that sneaky bastard—” Haruno smacked the back of his head “—*ouch*, Sakura-chan!”

“You really are annoying today,” she scowled, then whirled on her heel, snatched the mission paper Hatake had so conveniently left behind and marched towards their assignment location.

Regulus angrily picked at the dirt stuck under his fingernails, absently listening to Uzumaki and Haruno’s long list of complaints, when—

“What kind of rock is square with two holes?!” He blinked, following Uzumaki’s accusing, pointed finger over Regulus’ shoulder to where a perfectly conspicuous box was situated. “I see right through that!”

The box exploded, revealing—

“That’s the man I consider my rival!” Regulus exhaled, exasperated. He still refused to accept that the obnoxious little brat was the Hokage’s fucking grandson. Then, the tiny git whirled on Regulus, narrowing those dark blue eyes of his. *“You!”*

“Me,” he agreed. Konohamaru hated Regulus due to the terribly gigantic misunderstanding that Regulus was Uzumaki’s rival, which—*no*. He had tried—oh, how he had *tried*—to reassure Konohamaru that this was, in fact, *not* the case, but the brat refused to listen.

He tuned out the subsequent conversation—it was all horribly juvenile and Regulus wanted no part in it—scratching at the dirt glued to his fingers with an irritated frown. Regulus was *still* unaccustomed to physical labour, to getting his hands dirty, even after five years in Konoha. He startled, jerking backwards in alarm, when Uzumaki slammed into the fence with a resounding *crash*. Haruno stood over Uzumaki’s prone form, fist still raised, face twisted in fury. He idly wondered what Uzumaki had said to provoke her so.

Regulus whistled lowly.

Haruno rounded on him at the sound, green eyes comically wide with shock, as if she'd forgotten Regulus was there. Her expression faltered as she blinked, slow and uncertain, embarrassment tinting her cheeks pink.

"How dare you!" Konohamaru and sycophants #1 and #2 stepped forward, trembling with anger. "You bitch!"

Haruno's face was carved with rage. He watched as Konohamaru, too, suffered the wrath of Haruno's abnormally powerful punch. She stomped off, footsteps hard and heavy, hands still clenched into fists.

Konohamaru sat up, a small whine escaping him. "Damn that broad foreheaded ugly wench… is that really a girl? Seriously?" Haruno froze in her tracks, shoulders trembling, a single hand lifting to rest on her forehead.

He inhaled sharply. Insecurity was a vile, soul sucking emotion. He would know. Regulus, driven by irrational sympathy, stared down Konohamaru, gaze like ice. *"What,"* he bit out, a growl low in his throat, "did you just say?"

"I said—" Konohamaru's words died in his throat as he caught the expression on Regulus' face. He flinched, curling in on himself. Uzumaki, ever the hero, positioned himself in front of the brat, like a human shield.

"Teme, what—" Regulus' cold, furious gaze snapped to Uzumaki. He arched a disbelieving brow, the ghost of a snarl still curving his lips. Was he seriously defending this little shit? Uzumaki's mouth snapped shut, too-blue eyes darting to the side. He, at least, had the decency to look abashed.

"Sasuke-kun," came Haruno's voice, timid and quiet in a way it never was. He blinked, turning to her. "It's okay." Her green eyes were wet and glistening, and there was a wobbly smile curling at her lips—tentative but sincere. "I'm okay." Regulus exhaled through gritted teeth, took a slow step back from the cowering form of Konohamaru and walked over to her.

"Let's go," he murmured. Haruno nodded shyly, looking a mixture of shocked, grateful and embarrassed.

"You didn't have to." It was said quietly, barely a whisper.

"I know," he agreed, because he really didn't have to, "but, I did." It wasn't for her sake, either. He'd just seen himself—young, vulnerable, insecure—in her.

Then, a loud cry erupted from behind them and Uzumaki's voice rung out, distressed and alarmed, "Konohamaru!" Haruno and Regulus instinctively whirled around to see Uzumaki squaring off against two unfamiliar shinobi, one of which was dangling the little brat in the air by the scruff of his neck.

"That hurt, you little piece of shit," was snarled, angry and irritable, from between clenched teeth. He was dressed in a black, baggy, hooded full body suit and sported a triangular face-paint design. Regulus stared at his foreign *hitai-ate*.

“Don’t,” his female companion warned, her teal eyes sharp, a matching *hitai-ate* slung around her neck. *Suna.* They were Suna-nin. “You’ll just get yelled at later.” Why were they here?

“You jerk!” Uzumaki all but screamed. “Let go of him!”

“I don’t think so,” the male Suna-nin’s grin was all teeth as Konohamaru thrashed in his grip. “How about we play a little before the boss comes?”

Uzumaki charged with a war cry. The Suna-nin’s fingers twitched and Uzumaki jerked as if electrocuted before going for a tumble, tripping and slamming into the ground. Regulus blinked. How had he—?

“Oh,” he sounded so genuinely disappointed, “are all Konoha genin this weak?”

Uzumaki was quick to stand, jabbing a finger in the Suna-nin’s direction. “If you don’t let him go, I’ll make you pay!”

“You’re *so* annoying,” came the deeply irritated reply. Regulus agreed. Uzumaki’s screeching grated on one’s very soul.

“What did you just say? You stupid jerk—”

“Konohamaru is the Hokage’s grandson,” was Haruno’s calm, sensible attempt at diffusing the tension.

“And I’m the Kazekage’s son. What of it?”

Ah. Well. Rest in Peace, Uzumaki Naruto.

Haruno faltered at that, confidence vanishing in a blink. Her shoulders hunching, spine curving. Even Uzumaki paused in his tirade of insults, hopefully realising the severity of his gigantic misstep.

The Suna-nin sighed. “I really do hate runts,” he shot Konohamaru a poisonous glare, “especially younger ones that are rude.” His smile was like a grinning skull’s. “It makes me want to break them—”

“Kankurou.” Regulus went lethally still at the low, commanding voice. He kept his chakra coiled tight when he was within Konoha, extinguished to keep the flood of signatures from overwhelming him, but at times like this, he wished his sensitivity wasn’t so high. He hated being taken by surprise. Haruno took an instinctive step closer to Regulus. “Stop.”

He looked up, muscles coiling and heart stuttering, at the sight of a boy standing upside-down on a large tree branch, a large gourd strapped to his back, face swathed in shadow, positively *oozing* killing intent, which slammed into Regulus like a battering ram.

It wasn’t like Momochi’s, whose flooded the entire surrounding area and was unleashed with the intent to paralyse, to terrify. It swirled around the boy like he was the centre of an

invisible tornado, emitted at a constant rate that seemed as easy and natural as breathing, as though it was *always* like this.

“G-Gaara,” the newly dubbed Kankurou mumbled in shock, eyes wide. His grip loosened and Konohamaru fell to the ground with a loud yelp. The brat made a beeline for Uzumaki, cowering behind his orange-clad legs.

Regulus stared, lips parted in surprise, as a whirlwind of sand manifested before them, fading to reveal the newcomer—Gaara. His build was slight and lithe, complexion pale and fair, hair a flaming crimson, and eyes a sharp teal—a shade lighter than the sandy-blonde Suna-nin's, who had taken an immediate step back upon the nin’s arrival, licking her lips nervously.

His cold, arctic gaze lingered on Kankurou. “You’re an embarrassment to Suna.”

Kankurou recoiled, face crumbling in dismay. “P-Please listen to me, Gaara. T-They lashed out first—”

“Shut up.” Kankurou’s mouth snapped shut with an audible click. Gaara turned towards the gaggle of Konoha-nin. “I’m sorry about that.” Those teal eyes, glacial and flat, met Regulus’ for a short moment, his dark red hair fluttering in the wind. Regulus’ blood ran cold. The killing intent radiating from Gaara was *so intense*.

Then, Gaara turned on his heel, dismissing them all, a bored, indifferent expression on his face. “Let’s go.” Regulus’ limbs remained tense, muscles coiled tight until the three Suna-nin turned around the corner, disappearing from sight.

“The Chuunin Exams?” Regulus echoed, desperately hoping he’d misheard, only for Hatake to immediately crush his feeble hopes by brandishing three application forms at them.

Regulus refused to take his, resentment twisting in his gut like freshly-swallowed poison. “We’ve only been genin for *five months*.” The steadiness of his voice did not match the seething violence brewing in his expression.

Hatake raised his hands as if to placate him. “Maa, Sasuke—”

“Are you underestimating me, teme?!”

Regulus’ jaw clenched. In the past five months, Hatake had taught them one thing each—tree climbing for Haruno and Uzumaki, and a single, basic ninjutsu for Regulus—and yet he, somehow, expected them to survive the bloody Chuunin Exams?

Hatake and Regulus maintained unblinking eye-contact, Uzumaki’s shouts fading into the background. He loathed that stupid mask—it made the man near-impossible to read.

“This is just a nomination.” Regulus’ eyes narrowed. Hatake stared back unflinchingly. “Whether you take the exam is up to each of you. Those who wish to take it should sign those papers and turn them in at Room 301 by four tomorrow afternoon.” Then, Hatake vanished—

yet again—in a swirl of leaves, Regulus' application form floating to the ground. He stared at it, throat tight.

Uzumaki let out a loud cheer. "Chuunin Exams! Chuunin Exams!" He giggled. "If I win this, I'll be one step closer to Hokage." Uzumaki gleefully skipped ahead, leaving behind Haruno and Regulus, who stood together in distracted silence.

Haruno looked miserable and uncertain, and if Regulus were a better person—a *good* person, he would have comforted her, assuaged her worries. Instead, he snatched up the application form, formed the hand signs for *Shunshin*, and disappeared.

Regulus, from his position beside Hatake, skimmed his dark gaze over the long list of names carved into the memorial stone. "I have no desire to enter."

"I know," Hatake shifted beside him, "but Sasuke—" He let out an exhausted sigh, shoulders slumping. "You're an Uchiha." *You don't have a choice*, went unsaid, but Regulus heard it. Loud and clear.

Laughter broke free. Too raucous. Too unhinged. He could feel that single eye boring into him, felt it like a physical touch.

So they want their pet show pony on display. For all the nations to see, Regulus mused, fists clenching and unclenching rhythmically, "of course." He tipped his head back, eyes squinting against the burning sun, breath expelling from his lungs in an audible *woosh.*

He expected nothing less from Konoha.

Regulus stood in the shadow of a large tree, silently observing his teammates who stood in front of the examination hall, awaiting his arrival.

Uzumaki was dancing on the balls of his feet, an exuberant grin on his whiskered face, loudly and enthusiastically chanting, "Chuunin Exams, Chuunin Exams," earning himself more than one bewildered side-eye. Haruno, however, looked like a twitchy, paranoid pile of nerves—which was the appropriate reaction; genin *died* in these exams.

He let out a shuddering exhale, mentally steeled himself, then took several reluctant steps out of the shade and into the light.

"Sasuke-kun!" Haruno tittered, noticing him near-immediately, offering him a shy smile and a tiny wave. He inclined his head in greeting.

Uzumaki rushed towards him, bouncing excitedly. "You came, teme!"

"You sound surprised," he remarked dryly, arching a single dark brow.

Uzumaki shot him a *look*. "I'm not blind, asshole." Regulus twitched. He had been rather blatant in stressing his displeasure and distaste for the Chuunin Exams, hadn't he? Uzumaki's too-blue eyes narrowed into slits. "So, why *are* you here?"

Regulus stared. Then, he smoothly stepped around Uzumaki, heading for the examination hall. Uzumaki, spluttering in shock and anger, was quick to fall into step beside him, suspicious gaze boring holes into the side of Regulus' head.

Uzumaki's indignation dissipated the instant Team 7 entered the examination hall, distracted and overwhelmed by the sight before him. Regulus inhaled, slow and sharp, raking his dark gaze over the gathered genin, absently noting the various *hitai-ates*; Suna, Oto, Ame, Kusa, Taki.

His eyes were drawn to the large gaggle of genin loitering in a loose circle before the door falsely labelled 301. It was a terribly obvious genjutsu. Then, a boy in the most horrid green spandex charged forward, only to be roughly thrown backwards by the two nin guarding before the door.

"Lee!" It was a girl's voice, thick with alarm. Her hair was styled into twin buns, short fringe-bangs framing her pale face, which was twisted with concern as she knelt down beside this 'Lee.' "Please. Let us pass."

"We're only trying to help," nin #1 drawled with dark amusement, folding his arms across his chest.

His partner, nin #2, nodded. "Chuunin become *Captains*." He gave the genin gathered a heavy, pointed look. "The failure of a mission. The death of a comrade. Those are the Captain's responsibility."

"You think you brats are ready for something like that? Just *look* at you all," nin #1's lips twisted into a cruel, mocking smirk, and he let out a sharp, derisive laugh.

"We're doing you all a favour," nin #2 sneered, "by weeding out the *weak*." Uzumaki twitched violently, hands clenched into fists, knuckles turning white. Regulus winced inwardly, cautiously side-eying the blonde. He'd never taken well to insults—there was a shit ton of unpacked insecurity hidden behind all of Uzumaki's false bravado. "If you can't even get past us, then how do you expect to survive the exams?"

Uzumaki took a single, furious step forward, only to freeze when Regulus' hand clamped down on his forearm, grip like an iron shackle. Uzumaki turned, subjecting Regulus to those wide, questioning *blueblueblueb

was unable to recognise a basic fucking genjutsu. Besides, the mere thought of freely giving an advantage to these clearly incompetent strangers had his skin crawling.

Uzumaki's expression reeled from taken-aback to belligerent anger to comically conflicted to resigned.

They edged around the fringes of the crowd, making for the single adjoining corridor, only for Uzumaki to trip over his own feet, clumsily knocking into a genin with flawless, porcelain skin, long, sleek dark hair, and a pair of featureless pale eyes, which were narrowed at Uzumaki, ripe with irritation.

A Hyuuga, he noted with interest.

Uzumaki spluttered an apology, staring up at the Hyuuga with wide, cerulean eyes. The Hyuuga didn't deign Uzumaki with a reply, expression cold and icy, like winter at its cruelest. The longer he went without a response, the darker Uzumaki's expression got.

His 'Uzumaki-is-Going-to-Cause-a-Scene' senses were tingling, and Haruno, evidently realising the same, reached out and tugged on an orange sleeve. Uzumaki's head snapped towards her so quick there was an audible *click*. Haruno's face twisted into a scowl as she begun to argue with him, their voices heavy with frustration.

Regulus scanned the crowd, noting with much relief that no one was paying them any attention, sans the girl with the twin buns and the spandex-clad genin, who was staring at Haruno with—*oh no*—hearts in his round, dark eyes. *That* was not going to end well. For anybody.

Time to go.

He abruptly whirled on his heel and stalked down the corridor, heading for the staircase at the end. There was a sharp yelp of *"Teme!"* quickly followed by the sound of footsteps as his two teammates hurried after him, Uzumaki spitting insults, without any real heat, all the while.

Team 7 was so close—*so close*, dammit—to the staircase, when a loud, exuberant voice sounded from behind them. The trio paused in unison, all turning to face—

Oh no.

It was that genin—the green spandex wearing one, with the glossy, pitch-black hair styled into the most atrocious bowl-cut Regulus had ever seen. Uzumaki muttered a shocked, *"Centipede brows,"* under his breath whilst Regulus just stared, wrong-footed by the sheer amount of admiration in those wide, expressive eyes, as the genin gazed at Haruno with an unnerving intensity.

Chapter End Notes

the urge to jump ahead is strong af because OROCHIMARU. I have such a morbid fascination with his character. and the parallels between him and voldy.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

yikes it's been a while, i'm so sorry!
if you're still reading this, i love you~

See the end of the chapter for more notes

His name was Rock Lee, according to his over-enthusiastic, starry-eyed introduction, and he wanted 'the honour of knowing the fair maiden's name.'

Haruno spluttered. "Er, Sakura. Haruno Sakura."

"Sakura," he said slowly, as if tasting the words on his tongue. Then, Lee beamed, as bright as sunshine. "Let's go out together. I will protect you until I die!" Regulus arched a single brow, incredulous and unimpressed.

Haruno gaped. "I—uh, no… thank you."

If Lee was hurt by the immediate rejection, he didn't show it. He just bounced from one foot to another, grinning and vibrating with energy, completely undeterred. It was exhausting to look at. "Sakura-chan—" He started, paused. Then, "May I call you, Sakura-chan, my fair maiden?" Lee did not wait for a reply. "Sakura-chan, I will endeavour to change your mind—"

"I like someone else," she blurted out, cheeks flushing pink. "So—"

"Who?" Lee's dark eyes gleamed, hands balling into fists at his sides. "I will fight them for your honour—" he took a step forward, encroaching on Haruno's personal space "—for the right to date you, and to win your affections!"

Haruno took an uncertain step back, looking overwhelmed. Lee followed her, eager and determined. Regulus' lips curled into a frown. Haruno shook her head. "No. I'm not interested."

Lee paused, deflating for a moment, then straightened his spine and took yet another step closer to her. "I will prove that I am worthy, then. I will win the Chuunin Exams for you, Sakura-chan!"

Haruno's blatant discomfort had Regulus sliding into the far-too-small space in between them. Lee blinked in surprised alarm when Regulus levelled him with a frigid, icy glare. "She said *no*."

Lee spluttered and Regulus, fed up and irritated with the disgusting display of pubescent infatuation, turned away from the spectacle, reached out with both hands, snagged his teammates' arms and forcibly dragged them down the hall, ignoring Uzumaki's outraged protests.

The sound of footsteps followed them. "Wait! Sakura-chan!"

Regulus rounded on Lee, baring white teeth, lips twisting and peeling back into a snarl. Lee faltered. *"Enough."* Lee opened his mouth, but Regulus wasn't having it. "Haruno made her disinterest clear. So, stop pressuring her into agreeing. If you don't respect her decision, then you clearly don't respect her." Lee stared, dumbstruck, dark eyes blown wide. Ah. Was that too harsh?

The girl with the twin buns stepped forward, clearing her throat. "I would like to apologise on behalf of my teammate." Regulus waved her off, dismissive. It wasn't her fault.

Then, inky-black locked onto pale lilac.

The icy apathy in the Hyuuga's gaze was impressive—especially for a child. Young Regulus would've been green with envy. Adult Regulus just turned away and marched determinedly up the staircase. He could *feel* Haruno's gaze on him. He turned, twitching with regret at the pink flush high on her cheeks, the sincere shine in her wide, green eyes. He didn't want to encourage her crush. His actions were born out of disgust for Lee's behaviour, not whatever delusion Haruno's mind had most likely concocted.

They found Hatake standing, posture slouched and hands tucked into trouser pockets, outside the *real* room 301.

"Yo!" He eye-smiled. Then, blinked. "Huh, you all came…" His eye lingered on Haruno, flickering with surprise, before darting to Regulus, who stared back balefully. "So, I, er, neglected to tell you all something."

"How surprising," Regulus remarked dryly. Uzumaki elbowed him in the ribs.

"The Chuunin Exams can only be taken in teams of three," he said with a pointed look at each of them.

Regulus's lips twisted. He knew of Haruno's misgivings, her reluctance to take the Chuunin Exams. It would've been terribly easy to manipulate her, convince her not to take part. It was the single plausible way Regulus wouldn't be blamed for his non-entry. What a wasted opportunity.

"You all came of your own free will—" Regulus snorted, sharp and derisive "—and I'm proud of you, my cute little genin." Uzumaki puffed out his chest. Haruno's spine straightened. "Now, go!"

Regulus stepped into room 301, completely unprepared for the way every single bloody head swivelled to face them.

He went utterly still, spine cranking tight, hands clenched into white-knuckled fists, nails digging moon-crescents into his palms. His dark gaze swung left and right, assessing and analysing. The examination room had rows upon rows of benches with genin—all dressed in a myriad of exotic clothing and designs, marked by various foreign *hitai-ates*—milling about.

Then, there were thin arms around his neck and a warm body pressed against his back.

"Sasuke-kun!" His eyes fluttered shut in dismay. Yamanaka. He felt his throat tighten and his skin begin to crawl, shoulders inching towards his ears, a shudder of disgust rippling down his spine. Regulus was being touched—and he *hated* it. "You're late! I'm so happy to see you again!"

Regulus' face spasmed, fingers twitching, aching to grab and throw her into the fucking wall —

"Get away from Sasuke-kun, Ino Pig!"

Yamanaka unattached herself—thank Salazar, slid around Regulus, and gave her full attention to Haruno. "Why if it isn't Sakura," there was something sly and taunting in her voice, "and her big, ugly forehead." Regulus' lips curled downwards. What did everyone have against Haruno's forehead?

"So," came a lazy drawl from his right. Regulus swivelled to stare at Nara, who watched him right back, those brown eyes sharp and calculating. "You guys are taking this troublesome exam, too?" Regulus' jaw clenched. Nara held himself with the lazy, self-assured arrogance of knowing he was the most intelligent person in the room. It raised his hackles for some strange and unexplainable reason. "Man, this sucks."

Regulus made a noise of agreement, low in his throat. The arrival of Team 8 was marked by Inuzuka's loud greeting, to which Regulus muttered a low, "Them, too?"

"He speaks," Nara remarked, tone even and mild despite the razor-wire line of tension in his shoulders.

Ah. Nara had never heard his voice before. "Does that surprise you?"

"No," came Nara's immediate response. "I assumed it was intentional." Regulus stared. Nara shrugged, falsely nonchalant. "You're less likely to be asked questions if you're thought to be incapable of answering them."

Regulus gave a noncommittal hum.

"It also discourages interest. But—" he cut himself off with a snort, and shot a pointed look at Yamanaka and Haruno, who were *still* arguing over him. Regulus grimaced. Nara huffed in amusement.

"—I won't lose to the likes of you!" Regulus sighed, exasperated, turning to see Uzumaki jabbing a finger into Inuzuka's face. Inuzuka opened his mouth to retort, only for his response to die in his throat at the sound of a smooth, lightly amused laugh. Regulus turned,

and found himself staring at a pair of onyx eyes, framed by James Potter-style glasses. His nose wrinkled in disgust.

“You’re first-timers, aren’t you?”

Uzumaki, quick and ready to take offence to anything and everything, puffed up, belligerent. “What’s that supposed to mean, bastard?”

The unknown genin turned to face a riled-up Uzumaki, expression calm. “You lot are the ‘Rookie Nine,’ right?” He raked a pale had through his ash-grey hair, which was loosely tied back, a condescending smile twisting his lips. “It’s obvious, seeing you carrying on like *that*, screaming like children,” he huffed a humourless laugh. “This isn’t a field trip.”

“Who do you think you are?” Yamanaka seethed, stepping forward to stand beside Uzumaki, jabbing an angry finger in the newcomer’s direction.

“I’m Kabuto,” he offered, staring down at the furious blondes before him. “If you’d look around—” he gestured to the numerous cold and challenging stares being directed their way “—then, you’d know it was only meant as a friendly warning.”

Kabuto took one look at Uzumaki’s intimidated and nervous expression, and sighed, face softening. Regulus’ bullshit senses tingled. He was good—*very* good, but Regulus had spent a lifetime staring into and surrounded by false masks of civility

“It can’t be helped. You’re just clueless rookies.” Before anyone could gather their wits and react to Kabuto’s terribly offensive but true statement, he ploughed forward, “In fact, you all remind me of my old self.” It was clearly the right thing for this Kabuto to say, as the Rookie Nines’—honestly, what a stupid name—faces shifted, hostility easing.

“So,” Haruno spoke up, curious and tentative, “this is your second time?”

“Nope,” his lips curved into a wry smile, expression sheepish. “My seventh, actually.” Regulus itched with the desire to rake his nails across Kabuto’s face, to shred that sly, amiable look into tiny, bloodied pieces. It felt like a lie, to admit to such failure with confidence, as though constantly and repeatedly falling short—especially at Kabuto’s age, was not terribly, deeply unimpressive and humiliating.

“You must know know a lot about this exam, then,” Haruno needled, not at all subtle, inching closer.

Kabuto made a soft noise of acknowledgement, sounding as though he were holding back a laugh. “I do, that’s true,” he mused, offering an indulgent smile. “I’m even willing to share what I know with you all.” In exchange for *what?* Regulus’ eyes narrowed into slits. Why was Kabuto engaging with and attempting to gain the trust of, as he put it, ‘clueless rookies?’

Then, Kabuto revealed his ‘Nin-Info’ cards and the Rookie Nine swarmed him, hungry for information, for an advantage—disregarding, or not considering the possibility that it could be false information, given intentionally to sabotage.

“Not interested?”

Regulus side-eyed Nara, who’d also stayed back whilst the others had clambered over themselves in their eagerness. “It’s not that.”

“Hmm,” Nara slid his hands deep into his pant pockets, rocking back on his heels. “You don’t trust him.” It wasn’t a question.

Regulus made a sharp noise in the back of his throat. “You don’t, either.” Nara grunted his agreement.

Uzumaki flicked through the ‘Nin-Info’ cards, Haruno peering over the blonde’s shoulder, asked with an unsettling amount of awe, “How did you make these?”

“It’s nothing impressive,” Kabuto demurred, “I just burned information into them with chakra.” He what—?

Nara went very still, brown eyes narrowing. Regulus stared. It was an application of fuuinjutsu, the advanced kind. Regulus watched, disgusted, as the other seven all accepted it, nodding along as it were normal to possess such a skill as a genin.

He turned and made the colossal mistake of making eye-contact with Kabuto, who took Regulus’ accidental acknowledgement of his existence as an invitation to come over.

“You aren’t curious?” Kabuto asked, tilting his head, staring directly at Regulus, something unreadable nestled in his dark eyes. Regulus’ lip curled in disgust. It made Kabuto smirk. “How interesting,” he mused, “I thought that *you* of all people would’ve fancied having an upper hand.”

Regulus tilted his head up, calmly meeting his gaze head on. “Oh?”

“You’re an *Uchiha*,” he explained slowly, as though he were speaking to a toddler, “they’re all out for your blood.” Kabuto gestured, wide and flourishing, to the hungry, fervent gazes directed at Regulus, at the symbol on the back of Itachi’s jacket.

Ugh. Uchiha *this*. Uchiha *that*. Regulus loathed the obsession everyone had with the Uchiha Clan—*no*, with the Sharingan. Because that’s all Regulus was ever worth, wasn’t it? His family’s legacy. Both as a Black, and as an Uchiha.

“And how, exactly, is information that enabled your failure not once, but *six times* going to help?”

Kabuto’s face briefly tightened, before expertly contorting into something amicable. “It had nothing to do with the quality of the information,” Kabuto muttered, rubbing the back of his head sheepishly, the perfect picture of contrite. “I just wasn’t skilled enough to utilise it correctly.”

“And you think I am?” Regulus felt a mirthless laugh bubble up in his chest. “You certainly have high expectations for me.”

“You’re an *Uchiha*.” He said it again, with an emphasis, like it meant something—like he was trying to appeal to a familial or personal pride that didn’t exist. Kabuto laughed. Regulus’ eye twitched. “Your Clan has a reputation for producing top-tier shinobi,” he pointed out.

There was a tightness coiled up inside Regulus, curling around his organs, pulsing under his skin, churning his gut. His shoulders were heavy, weighed down by the constant, ever-evolving expectations of how he should live, act, be as the sole survivor—besides his mass murdering elder brother—of a dead, prestigious, powerful Clan.

A choking, hot feeling burned up Regulus’ throat. “Yes,” he agreed, falsely pleasant, “the Uchiha were *strong*,” the curve of his smile was a blade sharpened on all edges, “so strong that a thirteen year-old was able to massacre *all* of them in a single evening.”

Kabuto’s face froze. Nara stiffened beside him. Regulus’ smirk widened, contorting and stretching, like a gash splitting his face in two. Kabuto just *stared*, eyes like knives slipping under his skin. There was a moment of tense silence, like sand against his skin, coarse and grating. Then—

“My name is Uzumaki Naruto!” *Oh, for fuck’s sake*—“I won’t lose to you bastards!” Regulus sighed. It started deep in his chest and ended in a gust of exasperation. He shut his eyes in dismay. “You got that?!”

It was going to be a Long Day.

Team 7, much to Regulus’ chagrin, passed the first round, as did Teams 8 and 10, the Team with the spandex-glad genin and sixty-six others—Kabuto included.

Regulus, having already reached that day’s quota for human interaction, ached to return to the Uchiha compound, but instead found himself immediately escorted alongside the other advancing genin to the Forty-Fourth Training Ground, terrorised by a pretty kunoichi with a wild gleam in her eyes, saddled with a scroll, and unceremoniously dumped into the Forest of Death.

He landed alongside Haruno and Uzumaki, crouching low on the thick branch, pausing to tip his head back, gaze shifting up, lingering on the golden hue of the setting sun peaking through the canopy of the too-tall trees.

“Sasuke-kun,” he turned at Haruno’s hesitant whisper, staring into her wide, uncertain green eyes. “What do we do now?”

Regulus stared. How the fuck was he supposed to know? Haruno blinked, then flushed red, faltering under his unimpressed gaze, fingers twitching towards the scroll hidden in her leg pouch. Regulus averted his eyes. It wasn’t kind of him to lie to and manipulate a thirteen year-old, but there was solid logic behind his reasoning, so much so that insecure, diffident Haruno took responsibility for their scroll with zero fuss.

Uzumaki had made himself into a target with all his loud blustering and dramatic declarations. It was so easy to interpret his childish, baseless arrogance as smug superiority, the kind that grated on one's nerves and was so tempting to crush. If Regulus didn't know Uzumaki, he'd assume the idiot was genuinely attempting to irritate genin into murdering him—but that was just the effect Uzumaki Naruto had on people. And Regulus' mere existence—due to the truly baffling obsession this world had with the Uchiha—made him a priority target.

It was a logical argument, and whilst technically true, it was also a complete lie.

Regulus just wanted Team 7 to fail and Haruno was the least capable, the weakest link, the easiest to defeat in combat—so their failure would be attributed to Haruno's lack of skill, and not Regulus' twisted self-sabotage.

He sighed, lips pursed as Haruno and Uzumaki begun to argue. How exhausting.

Uzumaki was eaten by a *gigantic fucking snake.* Because *of course* he was. This was Regulus' life now.

He stared out into the shadowed forest, dark eyes fixed on the spot where the gargantuan snake had vanished, utterly dumbfounded. He dug his fingers into branch on which he crouched, hard enough his fingertips bleached white.

Regulus' chakra was coiled around him, tight and tense and strangling, hiding him from the snake's senses, as he stared and stared and *stared—*

He had two options. Go after the stupidly big snake or find Haruno.

They were equally unappealing. But only one would potentially, maybe result in his death. So, Haruno it was.

He exhaled on a sigh, slowly uncoiled his chakra, extended his senses and latched onto Haruno's signature. He blew out a relieved breath. She was nearby. He leapt off the branch, rocketing through the forest, moving from tree-to-tree with chakra-assisted jumps. Regulus came to a halt, perching in a tree directly above Haruno's signature, and peered down, dark eyes zeroing in on a shock of pink—

Regulus blinked. *What the actual fuck.*

Uzumaki, who'd been swallowed whole by an enormous snake not two minutes ago, stood unharmed—with no signs of post-snake-digestion—beside Haruno, an idiotic, carefree grin on his face. He was *right there*, and yet, Regulus couldn't sense him. *Uzumaki*—whose chakra signature was as bright and blinding as the bloody sun.

Regulus' face twisted, dread cold on his spine. Uzumaki was an idiot who hadn't even known chakra *existed* two and a half months ago—and yet, somehow, his chakra signature was perfectly, expertly hidden.

Something was *very* wrong.

He took a deep breath, swallowed. He had no real proof that this *wasn't* Uzumaki, but Regulus, if nothing else, trusted his instincts.

Then, Uzumaki looked up.

Haruno followed Not-Uzumaki's gaze, tipped her head back, gazing up at Regulus with wide, relieved green eyes. "Sasuke-kun!"

He dropped to the ground, landing between Haruno and Not-Uzumaki, dark eyes narrowed into slits. "Hn." He made a show of giving Not-Uzumaki a long, exaggerated one-over. "You look fine."

Not-Uzumaki scowled. "Why do you sound so surprised, hah?" It was remarkable, truly—the imposter's imitation of Uzumaki's infliction, tone, and pattern of speech. It would've been the perfect disguise, if not for the eyes.

Regulus stared into those *blueblue* eyes. And a stranger looked back.

"You were swallowed by a giant snake not five minutes ago," he remarked, voice deceptively light. Not-Uzumaki's face twitched. Regulus bit back a vicious grin. *Got you*. "Forgive me for my concern."

"You were *what?"*

"Ah, Sakura-chan!" The imposter blustered, rubbing the back of their neck, sheepish—but their *blueblue* gaze, too sharp and too cold, never left Regulus. They gestured to themself. "I'm fine, see? As if I'd lose to a snake—"

Haruno slapped the back of Not-Uzumaki's head. They pitched forward, ducking their head and moving with the blow, expression flickering—twisting with something like true irritation. The imposter slowly lifted their head, hands cradling their skull, voice pitched to a whine as they prattled on, complaining about how she 'shouldn't hit precious teammates.'

By Salazar. The imposter was a *brilliant* actor. Disconcertment snaked through him, twisting into an anxious coil in the pit of his stomach. It was all terribly unnerving. Especially since they were *still* staring at Regulus, even whilst arguing with Haruno.

His unease must have shown on his face because the imposter's lips curled in pleased, cruel amusement. It looked so inexplicably *wrong* on Uzumaki's guileless, young face that Regulus physically recoiled, a low tremor of unease vibrating up his spine.

The imposter saw this and cackled.

Haruno's mouth snapped shut mid-speech, wariness flooding her face, but it quickly morphed, twisting into irritation. "Naruto!" She raised a fist, bringing it down hard onto Not-Uzumaki's head. "What's *wrong* with you? Cut it out!"

The imposter's laughter ceased—abruptly, immediately, and an eerie, unnerving silence settled over them. Regulus' nerves sung with cold dread.

"I've forgotten just how imbecilic children can be," their face was a picture of disdain, voice thick and heavy with blatant derision. The imposter glanced at Haruno, whose entire face had blanked in incomprehension. Then, Haruno, finally realising that something was *very wrong*, took a shaky step back, entire body tensed and wary.

Not-Uzumaki's smirk didn't reach their eyes, gaze burning holes into a trembling Haruno. Then, Not-Uzumaki rounded on Regulus, licking their lips obscenely, and tilted their head to the side—the gesture eerily serpentine, intrigue bright in their eyes. Regulus' skin crawled. "You noticed. How?"

Regulus stared. The habit of talking—of sharing techniques, knowledge and tragic backstories pre-and-mid-fight was so bloody idiotic. "You think I'll tell you?"

Their smile was a naked blade to the throat. "You think you have a choice, child?"

Regulus' instinctive reaction was to bare his teeth in a snarl at the condescension saturating the imposter's tone, but stopped himself, lips pressing into a thin, grim line as his mind snagged on Not-Uzumaki's use of 'child.' The imposter spoke as if they were old enough to view a twelve year-old genin—technically, legally an 'adult' in Konoha—as such.

He grit his teeth. If it were true, and this was a *real* adult, then Not-Uzumaki was correct, there was no choice here; Regulus was so outclassed it was comical.

He scoffed, smothering his fear with irritation, and remarked, voice dripping with acid sarcasm, "You mean, besides the fact that you should be inside the belly of a giant snake right now?" Not-Uzumaki arched a single brow—as if to say *'go on.'* He bit down on his bottom lip, hard, and offered, "Uzumaki can't mask his signature."

Not-Uzumaki's eyes gleamed with dark, quiet amusement, lips curling. "My competence gave me away?" They licked his lips, long and slow. "What else?"

He swallowed thickly, wariness bubbling violently under his skin.

"It was your eyes," his gaze flickered back and forth between each of Not-Uzumaki's too-blue ones—the look in them still so *wrong*. "It's like looking at a stranger."

Not-Uzumaki made a low noise in the back of their throat and stared at Regulus, gaze unblinking, hard, thoughtful, mouth stretching wider, lips peeled back to reveal teeth.

Then, they slowly uncoiled their chakra signature, and—*oh*. By Salazar. Their chakra crawled through the air—oppressive, choking, malicious. So very similar to the suffocating pressure of the Dark Lord's magic that it had Regulus' blood running cold, stomach churning with the sharp and sickening bloom of fear.

This, he mused—hysteria gurgling up his throat, was definitely *not* the chakra of a genin. It couldn't be. It was *strong*—much stronger than Momochi's, and he'd been an S-Rank

missing-nin. But *why* was a potential-S-Rank shinobi participating in the Chuunin Exams under the guise of a genin?

The imposter smirked, sharp and terrible and darkly amused. Then, in a puff of smoke, transformed into an androgynous individual with a *kasa* sat atop long, smooth black hair, clothed in what looked like a misshaped, ugly sack with a hideous purple rope tied around their waist, and a Kusa *hitai-ate* on their forehead.

Haruno let out a startled noise as Regulus curled his fingers into fists, uneasy. This appearance still felt *wrong*, somehow.

There was something terribly, darkly amused in the Maybe-Kusa-nin's face. Their hand twitched, drifting towards their pocket, and Regulus' heart startled up to his throat—muscles coiling, body tensing, feet shifting.

His reaction didn't go unnoticed, the nin's low, mocking chuckle cracking in their mouth like broken, bloodied glass. The nin pulled out their scroll, waving it about lazily, tauntingly, mouth carved into a cold, cruel smirk.

"You need our Earth scroll, don't you?" No. What Regulus needed was to run. Far, far away.

Then, in a show of perhaps the most horrifying, disgusting thing Regulus had ever seen, they extended their revoltingly large tongue, wrapped it around their scroll, and *swallowed it whole.*

The nin glanced up, their dark eyes too bright, honest in their eagerness. "Let's see, shall we? What the Last Uchiha is capable of."

Chapter End Notes

okay, so. as interesting as i find orochimaru's character, writing him is like pulling teeth.
i tried so hard lmao, but i know i didn't capture his character all too well, so i'm sorry about that~
thanks for reading! ❤

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

i'm not happy with this, but here you go~

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He held his breath, blood roaring in his ears, gaze locked onto the imposter's.

A beat passed. Two.

Then, the nin let out a suffocating blast of killing intent. Terror curdled in Regulus' gut, jabbing at his insides like needles. His head spun, lungs tightening, chest spasming. Haruno had collapsed onto the forest floor, fingers digging holes into the dirt, entire body shaking violently, green gaze vacant as she stared aimlessly into the distance.

"You're still standing? Impressive." The nin's mouth contorted into a rictus grin. "Let's see how long that lasts."

Then, they lunged.

Regulus threw himself to the side—pain prickling across his cheek as something cold grazed his skin—diving into a head-first roll. He swung to his feet, body tense and muscles coiled. Regulus raised a hand, something hot and sticky smearing his fingertips. *Blood.* His throat tightened, eyeing the nin's kunai, which was dripping crimson.

He blinked, and the nin was suddenly before him, face contorted in glee. Regulus, with fear curdling in his chest, dropped, flattening himself, chest pressed to the forest floor, only just dodging the kunai carving a path over his head.

His skin prickled, horrifically aware of how the vulnerable back of his neck was bared, accessible. He rolled over onto his back, dark eyes going wide with terror at the flash of metal careening towards his throat. He jerked his head to the side, so the kunai scraped a bloody path down the soft skin of his neck, rather than impale his jugular.

The sheer force behind the attack drove the kunai deep into the dirt beside Regulus' neck, and in the split-second it took for the nin to wrench it back out, Regulus had flicked through the hand signs for *Shunshin.*

He landed on a thick tree branch, high above the ground, and staggered, arms pinwheeling. His head spun, and Regulus cursed, clapping a trembling hand over his bleeding neck.

He grit his teeth, jaw clenching. He needed to *move.*

Regulus leapt from tree branch to tree branch, moving *awayawayaway* from the nin's looming cloud of chakra—only to stumble, very nearly toppling off the branch as the nin's signature flared, rippling and stretching til it brushed against Regulus'.

Fuck.

It was a terribly advanced technique, as those that didn't share Regulus' innate talent for instinctive sensing, could only do so if they possessed both the time and skill to purposefully manipulate and mould their chakra signature to encompass the surrounding area.

His blood ran cold, reflexive terror clawing its way up his throat, rattling his insides. He leapt again, movements faster than before, neck and cheek throbbing with pain. He moved, mind blank with panic, desperate to put distance between himself and the now rapidly approaching nin.

He blinked, flinching violently at the shift in the air, the displacement behind him, senses screaming as the nin's awful, terrible signature flared inches from his back.

In between one breath and the next, Regulus was bodily slammed up against a tree trunk, bark digging sharply into his back as a hand clamped over his neck—grip like an iron shackle. Regulus met the nin's dark, crazed gaze, choking over his own breath as he clawed at his throat, futile in his attempts to pry those fucking fingers *off*—

The nin sighed. Disappointed. "I had hoped you'd be more entertaining." Regulus' gut twisted, simmering with rage. "It's really too bad."

His vision swum. *No.* He choked, tugging at the nin's fingers, breath stuttering as he struggled to breath. It felt like Regulus was drowning all over again. *No, nonono, no*—

Regulus, in a burst of frenzied panic, channelled chakra into his fingertips, strengthening them, and lashed out blindly, raking and clawing at the nin's face. There was an enraged, pained shriek, and Regulus grinned, half-mad, digging his fingers in deep into—*was that an eye socket?* He choked on a giggle, sinking his fingers further into flesh, and—

He could breathe again. Inhale. Exhale. In. Out.

Regulus blinked, vision clearing to reveal the nin, who now stood several metres away, with their face buried in their hands. He glimpsed a flash of *redred*, shifted his gaze, and froze, rendered speechless by the clumps of gore beneath his nails, the crimson staining his pale fingers. He glanced back up, only to go very, very still, heart startling into his throat.

Their face was unrecognisable, a dripping mess of torn flesh and blood and—

The nin cackled, loud and bright and gleeful, as a clump of flesh slid off their face, dropping onto the branch below with a loud *squelch.* Regulus swallowed. *He* did that. His mind twisted. *No.* He *couldn't*—He's not violent. Not like *this.* But *he had*—

"Oh," the nin's voice was breathy, excited. "You are *so* much more fun than your brother."

Regulus' ears rung. *Brother. Itachi*—

He stared in fascinated horror as the nin's remaining facial flesh begun to crack and peel, slowly sloughing off to reveal eerily pale skin, bright golden eyes with slitted pupils *(like a snake. why was it always snakes?)*, ringed with purple markings. "My name," he grinned, "is Orochimaru."

The Legendary Snake Sannin? *Oh, for fuck's sakes—*

So, the gigantic snake that ate Uzumaki belonged to Orochimaru. Right. Of course it did. Why was it, he wondered, that all the terrifying powerful, insane, eerily pretty, middle-aged men in his life had a snake fetish? This had to be some kind of plagiarism.

"What brings a Sannin to the Chuunin Exams?"

His lip curled into a truly terrible smirk. "You."

What—? *Oh.* The Sharingan. By Salazar, could no one target Regulus for a more creative reason? "I don't have it," he lied, like a lying liar who lies.

Orochimaru waved his long, bone-white fingers in a dismissive gesture—as if Regulus not having activated it was inconsequential, as if he hadn't infiltrated the fucking Chuunin Exams, held in the village he'd been exiled from, all for the Sharingan.

"It matters not." Regulus' expression spasmed. Orochimaru looked amused. "The Sharingan, I've found, isn't all that difficult to awaken." Great. Fantastic. He could only imagine what Orochimaru had in mind, seeing as it was trauma-induced.

Orochimaru lifted his hands to form a hand sign, that enabled his neck to stretch and elongate *(what the actual fuck—)*, winding and twisting through the air like a snake dancing to a charmer's tune.

Regulus' stomach contracted in terror. He wanted his fucking wand.

Then, Orochimaru's abominable extended neck careened towards him, impossibly quick.

Instinct had Regulus flinging his hands out, shouting, *"Protego,"* before he realised that his magical core was still that of a *child's,* and there was no way that *Regulus,* of all people, could cast such powerful wandless magic—

But, to his complete and utter shock, the air before him rippled, forming a near-invisible shield—just as Orochimaru's flying head reached him. Regulus flinched, recoiling in horrified disgust as Orochimaru's face slammed into it with a sickening, resounding *crunch.* Orochimaru froze, suspended mid-air, cheek smushed against his *Protego,* like it were a glass window.

It was such a barmy, nonsensical sight that Regulus had to choke back a hysteric giggle.

His floating head slowly withdrew, hovering on the other side of the *Protego*, eerie gaze glued to the near-invisible shield, slitted golden eyes dark with intrigue. His gaze slid to Regulus, who stared back, baleful and wary. "Well." Orochimaru paused. "That's new."

Regulus sneered reflexively. Orochimaru's mouth twitched in amusement.

It wasn't going to last, the *Protego.* It was draining his stupid, useless child's magical core, and fast.

He needed to leave. *Now*. He had no delusions about truly escaping this. It didn't matter how fast Regulus was. Not with Orochimaru.

But, seeing as Orochimaru was under the impression that Regulus had yet to awaken his Sharingan, he wouldn't kill him—not yet, or else all Orochimaru gained was a pair of forever-unactivated, and therefore useless, dark Uchiha eyes.

So, he was, at this very moment, not going to die. It wasn't at all reassuring. Orochimaru was entirely willing, and very capable of subjecting Regulus to a fate far worse than death to awaken his Sharingan. It was the thought of suffering the unknown at the hands of a Dark Lord 2.0 that had Regulus fleeing, despite the futility of it.

The *Protego* flickered, and Regulus' gut sank as Orochimaru's golden eyes gleamed with vicious satisfaction. Regulus was half-way through the hand sign for *Shunshin* when the *Protego* dropped.

Fuck.

Orochimaru's floating head *(seriously what the fuck—)* flew towards Regulus—jaw gaping wide, fangs *(exactly like a snake's—)* extended, and the last thing Regulus saw in the split-second before he disappeared in a *Shunshin* was Orochimaru's jaw closing over his throat—

Incredulous, disbelieving laughter bubbling up his throat. Was Orochimaru trying to *bite* him? The sheer fucking audacity.

He leapt from tree branch to tree branch, desperate to outpace Orochimaru's advancing signature, his thoughts a panicked clamour. He'd mentioned Itachi. It made sense, considering his desire for the Sharingan. But had Orochimaru seriously tried to bite *the* Uchiha Itachi?

Well, seeing as he was now after Regulus, Orochimaru had clearly failed. He didn't know wether to be terrified or impressed that a teenage Itachi had, somehow, beaten a Sannin.

He ran and ran and *ran*—Orochimaru never far behind, like a predator toying with, tormenting, terrorising its prey. He easily caught up to Regulus. Because of course he did.

Orochimaru's laughter rung high and cold as an impossibly powerful wind jutsu slammed in Regulus, knocking the breath out of his lungs and sending him careening through the air. Straight into a fucking tree.

He heard a loud, awful, distorted *pop.* Then—pure, unadulterated agony tore into him, shredding through his every nerve. He plummeted, tumbling head over heel, a scream trapped between his teeth.

The wind whipped at his face, stinging his cheeks. His right hand flailed, clumsily reaching for his left shoulder. He jerkily prodded at it. Hissed. Dislocated. *Fuck—*

An inhuman scream split the air as Regulus hit the ground.

It was pain like fire, and terror, like nothing else he'd ever known. It was searing, blinding, all-consuming—

He dug his teeth into the flesh of his bottom lip—*hard,* swallowing down his agonised scream, leaving a silence in its wake that was tangible, Regulus' pained wail ringing in the air like an echo. It was impossible that Orochimaru hadn't heard it.

He scrambled onto his knees, shaking in every limb, body aching all over—breath coming in burning, rattling stabs. He let out a long, shaky exhale, grabbed his left wrist and pulled it forward and straight, set his jaw against the pain, and guided the ball of his arm bone back into the shoulder socket. It popped back into position, and Regulus immediately begun to soothe the swelling in a terrible, unpracticed application of iryou ninjutsu.

He panted, ignoring the nausea and pain that circled in ever-tightening whirlpools, absently tucking a loose, sweat-soaked, inky-black lock behind his ear. Then, Regulus sensed it—Orochimaru's chakra signature. It was *so* close.

He bit back the scream of helpless rage building in his throat. He was exhausted. In agony. Lost. Filthy. But still, he pushed off the ground, staggering to his feet.

Fuck this. Fuck Konoha. Fuck the Chuunin Exams. Regulus wanted *out*.

Orochimaru's chakra closed in, the air displaced behind Regulus, and—

He spun on his heel, arms outstretched, catching Orochimaru's floating, isolated head between his palms. Orochimaru's golden eyes widened in shock as Regulus held onto his jaw, grip painfully tight.

The sheer force of the impact rattled his bones, sending him skidding back across the dirt, ankle snagging on a protruding tree root. Regulus tumbled, landing on his back, shoulder jarring at the impact. Black light splintered Regulus' vision, a starburst of pain shooting behind his eyes, splintering across his shoulder. *Fuck—*

Regulus' lip rippled, curling into a wordless snarl. He dug his fingers into Orochimaru's cheek, struggling and straining to hold him back. Orochimaru's fangs snapped at air, neck twisting and thrashing.

Think, Regulus. Think.

Orochimaru, as a floating head, couldn't form hand signs, so he needed to *get the fuck out* before Orochimaru's body arrived, which judging by how his long-ass, extended neck was rippling as if reeling something in, it was nearby—and approaching fast.

He squinted, and—yes. It was strange to sense, seeing as his signature was split in two—between a head and body, but it was undeniably Orochimaru's chakra barrelling towards

them. *Fuck.*

Ideas tangled together, coalescing into a single Gryffindor-esque plan—

Regulus' gaze locked with Orochimaru's.

Panic slammed into him, hard and unrelenting, but Regulus persisted.

The genjutsu was wordless, without hand signs or seals. It wasn't especially strong, nor powerful, as it wasn't Sharingan induced *(he didn't dare risk revealing it),* but it didn't need to be. He just needed time, however short, to get the *hell out of here*.

Genjutsu was so often misapplied, used for extravagant illusions, which were so utterly ineffective because it's immediately, glaringly obvious they're fake. It needed to be subtle, as the moment Orochimaru noticed the genjutsu, it was all over. He'd break it, instantly.

So, he tilted Orochimaru's reality several degrees off its axis. It was simple, nothing special. A version of reality where Orochimaru succeeded, and since his skill far surpassed Regulus' own, his brain wouldn't immediately acknowledge the inconsistencies, accepting it as reality.

The instant the genjutsu anchored in Orochimaru's mind, Regulus released his grip on Orochimaru's face and scrambled backwards, manipulating genjutsu-Regulus' arms to collapse under the strain of holding back Orochimaru—who immediately surged forward and bit down on genjutsu-Regulus' neck, which, in reality, was just air.

He made genjutsu-Regulus scream, praying he was correct in his assumption that Orochimaru's bite would hurt.

It was straining, maintaining a genjutsu capable of , however briefly, tricking *the* Orochimaru. He wanted, so desperately, to run. But, the genjutsu required so much Salazar-damned focus—

He staggered to his feet, legs trembling, watching from several metres away, as Orochimaru drew back, too-long tongue licking his lips with obscene satisfaction. He glanced down at genjutsu-Regulus' neck, as if to admire his handiwork—

Orochimaru's expression shuttered, golden slitted eyes going flat, stone cold.

His heartbeat stuttered as a spasm of terror gripped him. Regulus had miscalculated. He didn't know how. But he had. But *how?* The puncture wounds on illusionary-Regulus' neck were very realistic, based on his own experience at age six—involving Bella, Sirius, and a snake in the woods outside Black Manor.

So, then what—oh. The bite had a secondary purpose, one Regulus didn't know. Yikes. *Time to go.*

He channelled chakra into his legs, and leapt into the trees, landing on a thick, low-hanging branch, when Orochimaru's chakra surged, shattering Regulus' genjutsu.

Panic halted Regulus' steps. He snuck a terrified glance over his shoulder, staring down at—

Gold locked on black.

Regulus went very, very still. Orochimaru's eyes lit up with intrigue, lips slowly stretching to form a pleased smile.

"Very good, child." Hunger. Greed. *Want.* It flooded his expression. "Your eyes show much promise already." He licked his lips. Salivating. "Just imagine what your Sharingan could be capable of."

If he were honest, Regulus was curious, too. His first genjutsu had—even without the Sharingan's superior visual prowess, albeit very temporarily, fooled a fucking *Sannin.*

Well. He'd always favoured the Mind Arts—what with him being a natural Occlumens and a proficient Legilimens. So, perhaps it wasn't that strange for Regulus to excel at genjutsu the way he did.

His curiosity must have shown on his face, for something thoughtful, almost considering passed over Orochimaru's expression—there and gone in a heartbeat, quickly smothered by familiar greed as Orochimaru lunged—*again*.

Then, Regulus, acting on pure instinct, spun on his heel, magic surging forth—

Fuck. Wait. He didn't have his fucking wand. He'd never wandlessly apparated before, and *oh no*, Regulus was going to *splinch himself—*

There was a sharp, thunderous *crack* and Regulus disappeared, landing in a tiny clearing Team 7 had passed several hours ago—

His legs collapsed out from underneath him. He'd done it. He wasn't even splinched. Hysterical laughter bubbled up in his chest.

Orochimaru would find him, he knew. He shut his eyes, focusing. It was faint, on the edge of his senses—flaring wildly. *Oh.* Orochimaru was furious, completely, utterly enraged. Regulus' blood ran cold.

When Orochimaru found Regulus, there would be no more tests or games, no more playing around *(because that's what it was, Orochimaru wasn't even trying—).* Just cold, calculated efficiency.

If he hid his signature, withdrew his chakra into himself, then Orochimaru wouldn't be able to sense him. But, at the same time, Regulus would be unable to locate Orochimaru. Well—not that it mattered. He stood no chance. Orochimaru would find him. It was inevitable. But, still—

He coiled his chakra tight and stumbled at the loss, footsteps faltering. It felt *awful.* Like losing a limb.

Worst, he now had *no fucking idea* where Orochimaru was. Granted, Orochimaru didn't know where the fuck Regulus was, either. So, he pumped chakra into his legs, and ran and ran—

The trees passed by in indistinguishable blurs of brown, the shadows growing longer until the golden glow of the setting sun disappeared entirely, leaving Regulus running in the dark, with only the moon's soft, silver glow to guide him, mind whirling.

So. Orochimaru still hadn't caught him. Perhaps masking his chakra signature was worth spiralling into a paranoia that had Regulus vibrating out of his skin, teetering on the edge of a mental breakdown. He only knew Orochimaru was still chasing him, still trying to give him the Hickey of Doom, because there was a primal, indescribable sense of fear *screaming* at Regulus to *runrunrun*—

Then, he crashed into something solid.

He landed on the cold, hard dirt, pain jolting up his spine, shoulder throbbing at the jarring impact, breath punched out his lungs. He blinked, stupefied, staring up at the shadowed canopy, dark eyes blown wide, for a long moment.

"Uchiha?"

He blinked. Squinted at the shadowed face, barely-visible in the dark. Oh. It was Nara.

Then, remembering that he was currently being chased by this world's version of the Dark Lord—and honestly, at this point, Regulus wouldn't even be surprised if Orochimaru had some kind of bastardised horcrux and delusions of immortality—scrambled to his feet and dashed forward, attempting to move past Nara, every lizard brain instinct was still obnoxiously screaming a litany of *runrunrun*—

A hand clamped down on his forearm, grip like an iron shackle.

Regulus jerked, whipped his head to the side, lips pulled back in a snarl. He felt unhinged, borderline feral. He wondered if he looked it. Nara, unbothered, just tightened his grip, brown eyes utterly unreadable. "What happened to you?"

Regulus didn't answer. Nara simply continued to stare at him, eerily intelligent brown eyes dark with unnerving calculation, as if he was trying to dismantle Regulus with his eyes alone.

He didn't have *time* for this. Orochimaru could, right now, be perched in the trees above, watching and waiting, and Regulus wouldn't even know—

"Shikamaru?" Nara twitched. That was Yamanaka. "Where are you?" Nara's eyes left Regulus, breaking eye-contact, gaze darted unerringly to the shadowed trees from which Yamanaka's voice originated. "Chouji found—"

Now.

He took advantaged of the distraction and flung himself from Nara's grip. He whirled on his heel and sprinted in the opposite direction from Yamanaka, ignoring the low curse Nara let out as Regulus disappeared into the shadows.

Regulus was doing Nara a kindness. Orochimaru would kill Team 10. He, on the other hand, wouldn't be killed until Orochimaru confirmed his possession of the Sharingan, so he could

—presumably, tear them right of out Regulus' corpse's skull.

Still. Something felt *off*. Sharingan transplanted into a non-Uchiha couldn't be turned off. The drain on his chakra would be *immense.* It made no sense for Orochimaru to willing subject himself to such a fate.

Then, there was the biting. Like. What the actual fuck. There had to be a reason—

He heard a rustling. The leaves moved. His heart startled into his throat. The night was calm, tranquil. So, it wasn't the wind, which meant—

Oh no. No, no, *nono*—

He used *Shunshin*. Once. Twice. Thrice—

Ugh. *Shunshin* was Regulus' most favoured jutsu, as it enabled him to *run the fuck away* from undesirable scenarios, but it's limitation to short distance travel only was so terribly inconvenient.

Exhausted, he staggered. He tripped over a protruding tree root, stumbling into a clearing. An *occupied* clearing. He went very, very still. Staring with wide, disbelieving eyes. It was gigantic, the bear. It couldn't be natural. It *had* to be genetically engineered.

Then, his gaze snagged on crimson.

It was a girl his age with a Kusa *hitai-ate* and hair that gleamed a brilliant, beautiful red under the stray chords of moonlight that snuck through the dense canopy above. Her wide, terrified crimson gaze, framed by narrow brown glasses, shifted to meet Regulus'.

His gaze remained locked onto the Kusa-nin's, even as the bear's chest vibrated, shaking the ground with its low, threatening rumble. It took a single lumbering step towards the girl, and —

A snake—terribly gigantic and disgustingly familiar—catapulted into the clearing, ramming into the bear at full force.

He wanted to tear his hair out, throw up, fling his body down to the floor, *scream*—

How the *fuck* did it find Regulus? Summons could sense chakra, he knew. But he'd hidden his Salazar-damned chakra signature. So, how—

Scent. It had tracked him by scent. He reached up, tentatively touching his cheek and throat, both encrusted with dried, flaking blood. *Fuck.* Regulus turned back to the Kusa-nin, held those terrified red eyes and mouthed, *'Run.'* Her gaze flicked to the fucking oversized wrestling animals, hesitating—

The bear roared in fury as Orochimaru's summons twisted, toxic-green eyes zeroing in on Regulus. Terror swept through him, rattling his insides cold. *Oh no.*

The snake flung itself towards Regulus, only to jerk to a halt, shrieking in pure rage as the bear clamped its gigantic jaw over its tail, biting down *hard.* It thrashed, writhing violently. Regulus stumbled as the earth shook, trembling beneath his feet.

Black locked on crimson. He mouthed a sharp, angry, *'Go.'* It was telling that, this time, she didn't hesitate, bolting over a large tree root and disappearing into the shadows.

Now it was Regulus' turn to get the fuck out. He *Shunshin*'d. Then, *Shunshin*'d again, and again—

He lurched, stumbling as he landed, dizzy and exhausted down to the marrow of his bones, chakra reserves drained and magical core near-empty. He couldn't keep this up, he knew. Yet, he couldn't afford to stop moving. Orochimaru's summons had already proven it could track Regulus' scent trail.

Then, he heard it. The soft trickle of water. He inhaled, slow and sharp.

It was a river, gleaming an eerie black in the velvet darkness, the surface smooth, still and glass-like. He crept forward, footsteps silent on the forest floor, nerves coiled like a rubber band stretched to its limit. He reached the river's edge, easing into a crouch. There were genin from Ame and Taki participating, and Regulus knew, from extensive reading, that hiding in the water was a favoured strategy of theirs.

He wove the familiar hand signs, and begun to mould lightning chakra. It would be loud and bright, but—*fuck,* Regulus needed his blood and sweat, all his easily, very trackable fluids *gone.*

He cringed as the area lit up, too-bright strands of electricity jumping between Regulus' fingers, a soft crackling noise filling the air. It could signal his position, attract enemy-genin—but fighting, even in his exhausted state, would still be preferable to getting stabbed in the neck with a kunai *under the fucking water* and drowning *again—*

He stuck his electrified fingers in the river, and waited. But there was nothing. No pained shrieking. No blasts of killing intent. No bodies leaping out of the river, screaming bloody murder. No sharp, pointy objects stabbing through his still-submerged hand. *Nothing.* Just several floating fish *(definitely genetically altered because holy fuck that was not natural—)*, very crispy and very dead.

He cut off the jutsu and gracelessly tumbled head-first into the river, eyes shut tight as he scrubbed furiously at his skin. He hated every second of it. It was like being back in that accursed, wretched lake, with cold, skeletal fingers mauling, tearing into his flesh, dragging him *downdowndown—*

He burst out of the dark water, inhaling deep, greedy, gasping breaths, and hauled his useless body out of that infernal river and onto the bank. He took advantage of his drenched state, rolling in the leaves and dirt until it clung to his skin like mud, masking his scent.

Revulsion writhed in Regulus' gut. He was so *filthy*, and *oh,* if only Walburga could see him now—rolling in the dirt like a dog. He caught his giggle in his mouth.

He flopped onto his back, letting out a low groan of disgust when the churned, muddied dirt tangled with the loose, shoulder-length strands of his hair. He'd lost his hair-tie, somehow. He stared at the dark shadowed canopy for a long moment, then clambered onto unsteady feet, truly, deeply exhausted.

He exhaled on a weary sigh, then jumped up, up, *up.* His heartbeat pounded in his ears, a nervous, eager drum, as Regulus leapt between the trees. Every rustling leaf and flickering shadow had terror crackling through his veins, nerves tightening and singing with apprehension.

How had Orochimaru even gotten into Konoha? He was a Legendary Sannin, yes. But to have slipped under *everyone's* radar? It shouldn't be possible. Unless Konoha was truly that incompetent, which—Regulus stifled a snort, wouldn't be at all surprising.

It was as he headed upstream, jumping between the larger, overhanging trees along the riverbank, that Regulus found it—a natural hollow, at least ten metres above ground. He reached into Itachi's jacket pocket, withdrawing a storage scroll that Regulus had, in his paranoia, prepared far in advance.

He pulled out rolls of ultra-thin wire, a set of explosive tags, a water bottle, ration bars, and a single kunai—then begun to set up a perimeter. After, he ducked inside the little hollow, took sips of water, ate a ration bar that tasted like ash in his mouth, and curled up into a ball, kunai clutched to his chest—watchful eyes staring out into the darkened forest until exhaustion overtook him and he fell asleep.

The resonating *boom* of an explosion jerked Regulus awake.

Chapter End Notes

if anyone didn't understand, orochimaru's bite leaves a mitsudomoe—the cursed mark, but regulus doesn't know that, so orochimaru immediately noticed it was a genjutsu.

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

> yikes, so. it's been a long ass time since i've updated, and i'm so so sorry! if anyone is still reading this, then thank you! and i hope this chapter is okay~ ❤

Panic slammed into Regulus, hard and unrelenting, curling up in his lungs, skittering down his spine. Someone had triggered his traps. It had better not be fucking Orochimaru.

He scrambled, grip tightening on his kunai, and lunged for the hollow opening just as a second, deafening *boom* sliced through the air. The shockwave blasted Regulus backwards, scorching wind whipped at his cheeks, flinging him back deeper inside the hollow, body slamming against it's inner wall, air punched out of his lungs.

He choked, throat convulsing, head filled with white noise. Ears ringing, buzzing with static. He crawled forward, dug his fingers into the rough bark on the side of the hollow opening, grip tight enough his fingertips bleached white, and hauled himself out, teetering atop a thick branch.

He squinted, straining to see his attackers through the smoke and heat still shimmering in the air, but the colours bled into indistinguishable blurs. *Ah, Fuck it.* He activated his Sharingan, vision sharpening, and—*oh,* that was an Oto *hitai-ate.* He exhaled on a sigh of relief, blinking his Sharingan off. Not Orochimaru, then.

But, still.

Time to go.

He turned and ran, heartbeat stuttering, as furious shouts sounded behind him. In his panic, he staggered, nearly toppling off the overhanging tree branch and into the river directly below. *Bollocks.* He gritted his teeth and continued along the branch, using the momentum to leap across the river, landing in a crouch on the other side.

He exhaled through his nose, right hand still clenched around a kunai, and tipped his head back, staring blearily at the sparse light glinting through the canopy above, at the leaves dyed a molten gold.

He clenched his jaw. It had been less than twenty-four hours since the Second Task started, and yet—

He was alone. Had no scrolls. He was injured. Exhausted. Filthy. Lost. And the target of a Legendary Sannin—an *S*-Rank missing-nin.

His breath expelled from his lungs in a heavy *woosh.*

He needed to find the Tower, and fast. Orochimaru was still lurking, desperate to give him the Hickey of Doom, and if Regulus remained here, out in the open like a sitting duck, he would undoubtedly find him. It wasn't just the knock-off Dark Lord, either. There was also the extremely pissed off Oto-nin that'd survived Regulus' explosions—which weren't subtle. Like, at all.

So, soon, eager, opportunistic genin would come crawling out of the woodwork, expecting to loot scrolls from the unconscious, wounded, or dead—though, Regulus doubted those explosive tags could kill. If only he knew fuuinjutsu, he bemoaned, then Regulus could deconstruct and modify the sealing matrix, increase the outward release of energy—

The hairs on the back of Regulus' neck rose.

He flung himself into the thick undergrowth, knees and elbows jarring painfully as he impacted, hard, with the packed dirt. He glanced over his shoulder to see a flurry of shuriken pierce the spot where he'd been crouched only moments before. Then, there was a flicker of movement above, the flash of a *hitai-ate*—

"You *missed?"* It was incredulous. Enraged. "How the fuck—"

"—Oh, like *you* could've done any better—"

"—The Uchiha shit was literally *sitting—"*

Regulus army-crawled through the bushes, heart lodged in his throat, arms and legs trembling. Then, footsteps trampled past, and Regulus froze—limbs locking up, breath stilling in his lungs, stomach churning.

He waited. Waited some more. Until he was completely, utterly certain that the bloody Oto-nin were *gone,* then staggered gracelessly to his feet.

He wove his way through a sea of twisted, protruding roots, each movement causing the old, hardened mud clinging to his skin to crack and peel like dried glue. He walked for several hours—creeping between the shadows, turning away from every shout, every *clang,* until he reached a place where the trees stood unnaturally close together, roots intertwining, the undergrowth thick and tangled.

He sidestepped a gnarled root, foot knocking against an overgrown bush, which, to his shock, rolled aside to reveal a large, gaping hole.

Regulus stared. Frozen.

Its roots weren't embedded. It'd been dug up somewhere else and intentionally dropped here to conceal the entrance. The hole, he noted, gaze lingering on the its smooth edges, was too perfect to be natural. It could only be the result of a skilled application of *doton* jutsu.

It set his teeth on edge.

He slowly eased into a crouch and leant forward, peering inside. It sloped downwards, the bottom obscured by a swirl of shadows.

He picked up a stone, hurled it into the hole. He waited—grip tightening on a kunai Regulus barely knew how to use—but no response followed, save for the dull echo of a skittering stone. He flexed his fingers. Unsure. Wary. Was it still occupied or had it been abandoned? He couldn't tell. But, well. It was still shelter.

He crawled into the hole, heart jumping in his chest. Then, he turned to refit the bush, concealing the entrance and plunging it into darkness. He muttered an incantation and a contained swirl of harmless, icy blue fire flickered into existence over his open palm, washing everything in an ethereal blue light.

He shuffled, inching further down, until—*oh.* It wasn't a hole, but a tunnel—one that widened after several metres, opening into a square underground room with a ceiling pierced by thick, contorting roots.

Dread cold was on his spine. Unease unfurling in his chest.

He stared at the bed, expertly crafted out of hardened mud, and swallowed, throat tight. This was, undeniably, far beyond genin level. So, either there was a super secret prodigy hiding in plain sight, which—*bugger*, or it had been constructed prior to the Chuunin Exams, and the shinobi responsible had just… left it here, *or* this was Orochimaru's handiwork.

For the sake of his sanity and continued existence, Regulus prayed it wasn't the latter.

He curled up in a corner, the cold, hard dirt pressing against his back, kunai clutched close to his chest. He closed his open palm over the icy blue flame, extinguishing it, plunging the room into darkness, and let his eyes slip shut.

Regulus sat in the dark for Salazar-knew how long, marinating in his own filth.

He was covered in layers of grime. His skin prickled, and his scalp burned. He smelt rancid, and his hair was a matted, tangled, crusted mess. But, despite all of that, he was *alive*, which was a genuine surprise—Regulus had half-expected to have his throat slit in his sleep.

He was parched, too. His mouth itched, lips cracked and bitten raw. Regulus needed water. But, he grimaced, staring at the empty, crinkled water bottle discarded on the floor, in order to get some, Regulus would have to go outside.

So, he crawled out of the literal hole in the ground, emerging from the dirt with a strained gasp, recoiling from the searing sunlight. He hissed out from between gritted teeth, jaw clenched and eyes squeezed shut. *Ugh.*

Now he just needed to find the river. He snorted. Easier said than done.

He crept through the forest, cursing as the too-large-to-be-natural thorns *(why was everything in the fucking forest like this—?)* snagged on Itachi's muddied jacket sleeve, twisting into the

fabric. He scowled, curling his fingers around the sleeve, and *tugged—*

It didn't budge. He was stuck. Brilliant.

He shifted his weight, pulling until he was bright red in the face from exertion. He blew out a frustrated breath. *Bugger this,* he thought viciously, and wrapped his fingers around the thorn, wincing as it sliced into his skin, and heaved.

He tore free, and the abrupt lack of resistance sent Regulus tumbling backwards into a bush. He cursed a string of profanities that would have Walburga screeching as he swatted brambles out of his face. He rolled over onto his stomach, spat out a leaf, and—

He blinked.

Huh.

It would seem that Regulus had found the river.

He crawled forward, gaze fixed longingly on the water *(he was so, so thirsty—)*, but froze, body locking up, at the distinct murmur of voices. Regulus' head snapped to the side. He bit down on the inside of his cheek hard enough to draw blood, swallowing a curse, inching back into the bush.

It was the team from Taki. *Fishing.*

He eyed their small pile of fish, hunger gnawing at his stomach.

He could steal them. But… he'd have to roast them over a fire, which—*no,* absolutely not. That would draw *so much* unwanted attention. Besides, surely he wasn't meant to just… bite into it, like some savage. He'd have to gut and debone them first. Which he didn't know how to do.

He scowled. He didn't survive Orochimaru just to choke on a fish bone and *die.*

Despondent, he slunk back into the trees, heading further downstream. Regulus needed to find an empty riverbank. His incessant thirst was becoming terribly inconvenient. He quickened his steps, rounded an abnormally large tree trunk, and—

—hit something warm and solid.

He staggered back, blinking fast, eyes catching on a glint of metal. *Hitai-ate.* He reacted on pure instinct, hooking his foot around their ankle and slamming them into the dirt. In a blink, he was crouched over them, kunai pressed to the soft underside of their throat.

Blood pounded in his ears. Vision blurry. Hands trembling.

His gaze focused, and—*oh.* It was that girl from last night, the Kusa-nin. Her wide crimson eyes, framed by those ugly glasses, stared up at Regulus, face frozen in a contortion of shock and terror. Then, she blinked. Long and slow. Something like bewildered recognition slowly dawning in those wide, wide red eyes, which—

He had to be misinterpreting it. It had been dark, at night—and Regulus was now covered in filth, hardly recognisable. But somehow, he *knew* that she could see past the greasy, gnarled, tangled mess of hair, and the several day old dried mud and blood clinging to his skin, to the boy hidden underneath.

"You're alive," she breathed in shock, utterly disbelieving. Alive? *Oh.* She'd thought that the bear or snake had—

He shot her a withering look. "As if I'd let some mutated monstrosity kill me."

The girl snorted, and her body, which had been strung taught and tense as a wire, slowly and tentatively begun to *relax,* as though Regulus didn't have her pinned, trapped, with a kunai to her neck. Regulus wouldn't slit her throat. He hadn't fallen so far as to murder a *child* in cold blood. But she didn't—*couldn't* know that.

Children these days. No bloody sense of self-preservation.

She opened her mouth to retort, but immediately snapped it shut, expression slackening, crimson eyes somehow distant yet focused. It was a look he recognised. *A sensor.* It explained her shock and terror at having literally run into Regulus, at having failed to sense his approach.

Then, her expression cleared, panic burning bright in those wide, wild red eyes.

He was on his feet in an instant. He knew that look. Their gazes locked, and Regulus extended a hand, which she grabbed with no hesitation. He hauled the girl up—

And then they were running. Hard and fast.

Regulus could hear them, now. Voices growing louder as they drew closer and *closer*—

He found himself giggling. A breathy, high-pitched thing of pure, unadulterated panic. *Bollocks.* They leapt over an abnormally gigantic root, ducked under a low hanging branch, skidded clumsily around a too-big fuck-off tree—

He caught movement out of the corner of his eye, heart seizing in his throat. It was an explosive tag, tied to a kunai. Flying directly towards them.

He threw himself at the girl, bodily slamming into her, arms wrapping tight around her shoulders. They hit the ground hard. Tumbling fast down a steep slope. The girl let out a shocked, pained, outraged cry. He ignored her, teeth clenched like a furious animal as he fought against the instinctive desire to reach out, to grab something, *anything* to slow their descent—

The shockwave that exploded above them was so fucking *loud* and bright and—

The ground levelled out and they smacked into the hard, packed dirt with such force the air was punched out of Regulus. He took deep gasping breaths, chest rattling and seizing, lungs stuttering against each inhale.

He laid there—flat on his back, limbs sprawled like a starfish, the girl a heavy weight atop him. The touch made his skin crawl. Then, she cursed, pushing herself up and off of Regulus, clumsily staggering to her feet. He stared up at the canopy—limbs heavy and leaden, body sore and aching—and licked his cracked lips, throat uncomfortably dry.

Honestly. All *this*, just because Regulus had wanted some water.

A sharp, forceful tug on his hand and an agitated bark of, *"Get up!"* had his gaze snapping to the girl, watching as her wide, fearful eyes flicked up to the top of the slope they'd just tumbled down.

Ah. Right. Their murderous pursuers.

He let her haul him upright, biting back a pained groan, face twisting into a grimace. He hurt *everywhere*. Ugh. Fuck this thrice-damned forest and fuck Konoha and fuck the shitty, snake-obsessed—

And then they were running. *Again.*

It was as the trees begun to thin that he saw the tower. He blinked. *Huh.* He'd half-expected her to lead Regulus into a trap. Then, he saw the figures seated on the steps outside. Uzumaki, Haruno, and—

His face twisted. What in Salazar's name was bloody *Kabuto* doing here?

"Teme!" Like a dog spotting a squirrel, Uzumaki rocketed towards him. He stumbled as Uzumaki flung arms around him, wrapping Regulus in a hug, only to recoil a second later, nose wrinkling in disgust. "Ew. You *stink."*

"Naruto!" Haruno's fist came down on Uzumaki's head.

"B—But he does!" Uzumaki spluttered.

Haruno scowled, then she turned to face Regulus, and—

Burst into tears.

Ah. Bugger. He cringed. He must truly look terrible. "Sasuke-kun! What happened?"

Uzumaki snorted. "He got his ass beat, I bet." Regulus sneered. He had. But at least he'd *lived.* Uzumaki, the idiot, probably would've tried to fist fight Orochimaru, and been reduced to a bloody smear beneath Orochimaru's ugly shinobi sandals.

Haruno was, for some reason, yelling again. And Uzumaki was shouting right back. He tuned them out, instead focusing on the walking, talking red flag who was now *smiling* at Regulus like he wasn't one of the shadiest gits Regulus had ever met.

"Oh, oh! Guess what? We got a Heaven Scroll!" Uzumaki launched into a Grand Retelling of their escapades, and how, with fucking *Kabuto's* assistance, they'd 'kicked ass.'

“We couldn’t have done it without him,” Haruno chimed in, earnest—and perhaps sensing Regulus’ incredulity, she added a firm, “He really did help.”

“Did he now,” he said, voice flat, staring at Kabuto with dead eyes. “In exchange for what?”

He laughed, airy. “Don’t be like that,” he sounded amused. “Can’t I just help a fellow Konoha-nin out?” No. No, he could not. The only person that answer would ever be both acceptable and believable from was Uzumaki Naruto.

He shot Kabuto a *look* that he hoped conveyed just how much Regulus believed him—which was *not at all*, but Kabuto’s smile only grew wider. Ugh. What a tosser. There was no way Kabuto wasn’t aware of just how stupidly suspicious he seemed.

“—bastard, so what happened? You smell gross. Like when I forget about the milk in my fridge, and it goes all lumpy and thick—”

It was because Regulus was looking so closely that he caught the shift of Kabuto’s gaze, the brief drop of eyes to his neck, to where Orochimaru had tried and failed to bite him. His blood ran cold. Kabuto’s gaze snapped back up to meet Regulus’ own, eyes dark and unreadable.

He knew. Kabuto *knew.* About Orochimaru. His plans for Regulus.

He saw red. Literally. His vision went spotty and dark at the corners, and his fingers twitched with the desire to gouge Kabuto’s eyes out. It certainly couldn’t be harder than clawing Orochimaru’s fucking face off—

“Oi, Kabuto!”

He turned to see two shinobi bearing the Konoha *hitai-ate* emerging from the forest, masks covering the bottom half of their faces. He squinted. Ugh. Kabuto’s teammates. Fantastic. More dubious individuals.

“Ah, sorry, you guys,” he sounded sheepish. “I got a bit involved in something.” Regulus stared. It was suspicious, how little Kabuto’s teammates cared that he’d abandoned them to secure Team 7’s success.

“Yeah! He helped us!” cheered Uzumaki, folding his arms up behind his head, grin stretched wide, blue eyes crinkling.

“No, no,” Kabuto waved him off, “I didn’t do much.” At Uzumaki’s dubious look, he firmly added, “I’m serious. It was because you both fought hard. You were amazing at the end, Naruto-kun.” Uzumaki blinked, blue eyes wide, cheeks pinking. Regulus’ mouth twisted in disgust. “Well, I wish us both luck.” Kabuto smiled, all bullshit and insincerity, then opened a door and slipped inside alongside his teammates.

Speaking of *thank yous,* Regulus owed one to…

Oh.

The girl was gone.

He didn't tell anyone about Orochimaru.

Not Iruka, when he emerged from Team 7's scrolls. Not Hatake, who'd proven his incompetence as a sensei over and *over*. Not even the Hokage, when stood before the twenty-one successful genin giving a speech that Regulus ignored.

If Konoha's best and brightest had failed to sense him, then they deserved to fall victim to Orochimaru's plans, because surely, he wouldn't invade Konoha *just* for a potential Sharingan. At least, Regulus hoped not. Because then that would mean that Orochimaru was desperate. And desperate people were *terrifying.*

There were too many eyes on his person, and he would bet the Black fortune that Orochimaru was one of them—hiding amongst the array of jounin. It was expected, considering Regulus' state. He was bloodied. Bruised and filthy. Far more so than anyone else. If he weren't so impossibly *done* with absolutely everything and everyone, he'd feel utterly humiliated. As it were, he was so far past the point of caring it was almost comical.

He glanced about, but didn't see his red-haired saviour. Her team mustn't have made it. Then, he accidentally locked eyes with the Hyuuga boy, who was radiating judgement in near-tangible waves. *Oh,* how Regulus ached to tell the pristine-looking git to *sod off*. Honestly. He'd like to see the Hyuuga brat survive a round with an S-rank missing-nin, and *not* get at least a little fucked up.

Then, a sickly, gaunt jounin appeared and announced the preliminaries, ending his little speech with a, "those of you who wish to drop out, please speak up now," which automatically made him Regulus' favourite person ever.

He perked up. Could he truly? He went to raise his hand, and—

Met Hatake's eye. He held that dark gaze for a long moment, acknowledging and hating the silent warning in it, before ripping his eyes away. He felt as if all the air were seeping out of his lungs, and Regulus wasn't sure if he wanted to cry or laugh. Both, maybe.

"The preliminary selection will begin immediately, so it will be individual battles from now on. It is your decision, so feel free to raise your hands and drop out."

Then, Kabuto raised his hand. "Excuse me, I'll quit."

Dead silence.

Regulus choked down a hysterical giggle. *Hah.* Of course. He rolled his eyes at ensuing Uzumaki's outrage, and when Kabuto's gaze met his, Regulus shot him a withering glare, to which Kabuto responded with a wink. Regulus sneered. The sheer audacity—

Then, a section of the wall slid open, revealing an electronic signboard.

"Now, let's announce the two names for the first battle."

It was—

Akado Yoroi Vs. Uchiha Sasuke

Wait. He squinted. Dubious. Who the fuck was that?

Akado Yoroi, it turned out, was one of the suspicious gits from Kabuto's team, so *of course* he was Regulus' opponent. He was tall. Older, too. Definitely over twenty. He stepped forward to face Akado, who, even with half his face covered, still managed to look victorious, as though he'd already won. Regulus scowled.

"Now then, please begin."

Bugger. Okay. Stay calm—

He threw himself to the side, diving into a head-first roll, just-barely dodging a barrage of shuriken. He landed in a crouch, head snapping up. *Oh, fuck.* His heart startled into his throat. Akado was *right there.* Fists glowing with light-blue chakra, swinging for Regulus' face. He braced his palms against the floor, and whirled, sweeping his legs out in wide arc, slamming into Akado, knocking him off his feet.

He flung himself backwards, trying to gain distance, but Akado was already back up, fists still glowing that ominous light-blue which had his brain screaming *stayawaydon'ttouch.* But, how to win without being touched—*oh.*

Akado charged, and, apparently having deemed him a non-threat because he lacked a Sharingan, met Regulus' gaze, those dark eyes gleaming with a vicious determination. *Hah.* Idiot. He quickly layered a genjutsu over himself. Akado rushed at Regulus, who side-stepped, watching in mild amusement as Akado charged straight for the genjutsu-Regulus.

He slid a kunai out of Itachi's jacket sleeve. It hit his palm just as Akado threw his glowing fist, aiming half-a-metre to Regulus' right, directly at genjutsu-Regulus' face. He swung the kunai. Fast. The ring slammed *hard* into Akado's temple. He dropped like a sack of bricks.

Silence.

Then, the observation platform broke out into applause. *Huh.* That was stupidly easy. What the bloody hell.

He headed up the stairs, avoiding all the eyes boring into his person—prickling against his skin, and ignored Uzumaki and Haruno clamours for Regulus' attention, and ducked into a hallway, intent on finding a bathroom.

He glared, baleful, at his reflection, gripping the edge of the sink, knuckles turning white, staring into hollow chips of obsidian, purple smudges bruising the thin skin beneath. It was eerie, still, to see such a young face reflected back. His eyes, at least, reflected Regulus' true age, betrayed the deadened twenty three year-old hidden underneath too-young flesh.

His trembling fingers fumbled for the tap, and he stuck his head under the running water, scrubbing at his skin and the roots of his hair, harshly, letting muddied water streaking down his face. He ached to use *Scourgify*, but knew he couldn't justify it if Regulus were suddenly, completely clean. He lifted his head and stared at Sasuke's too-young reflection with dull black eyes. Dirty water droplets trickled from his wet, dark hair, trailed along his sharp cheekbones, then down his neck, disappearing beneath the high collar of Itachi's jacket—

He jerked, stiffening in surprise, fear knotting in his chest. He wasn't alone.

Behind him, stood a shinobi with a Oto *hitai-ate.* He stared, wide-eyed, at the unknown's reflection, frozen. *Who in the bloody, blithering fuck—*

He stared into those *slitted*, dull brown eyes, and—*oh.* "Orochimaru."

He swallowed, throat tight, as Orochimaru's slitted gaze flitted over Regulus' face, contemplative and silent. Then—"You've only delayed the inevitable," his mouth twisted into something that could be called a smile, if not for the complete and utter lack of humour on his face. "But," he paused and smirked, lazy and predatory, "You already knew that."

He did. There would be no escaping Orochimaru. But—

"The bite," he ran his tongue over his teeth. "What—" *What does it do?*

Orochimaru tilted his head to the side slightly—an eerily serpentine gesture, pony tail swishing with the movement, and just—*watched* Regulus. His expression remained detached, impersonal. As if he were staring at a particularly interesting insect, and not a person. Then, he blinked, expression twisting with dark amusement. "It's a mark. A brand, of sorts."

Regulus *felt* his expression go flat. His lips thinned. Was he fucking serious? This shit *again?* What was it with megalomaniacal, snake-like men and their propensity for *marking* people?

No, he thought, staring at Orochimaru's cruelly amused reflection, *Not people. Not to him.*

A low tremor of fear rippled inside of him. It must have shown on his face, for Orochimaru chuckled maliciously, baring white teeth in a terrible grin. "I'll be seeing you, Sasuke-kun."

He slipped out the bathroom, leaving Regulus to stare at his trembling reflection. Dark eyes wide. Blood cold with terror.

Fuck.

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